

青春ブタ野郎は

ロジカルウィッチ

の

夢を見ない



鴨志田一  
イラスト 溝口ケージ

# Seishun Buta Yarou Series

vol.3

by Kamoshida Hajime

[Novel Updates](#)

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**Sakurajima Mai**

A third-year at Minagatara High School and an extremely famous celebrity. She's Sakuta's extremely busy girlfriend.

"Morning, Kaede-chen."



**Azusagawa Kaede**

Sakuta's younger sister, who turned fifteen this year. After being bullied, she no longer leaves the house.

**Youth Question 02**

Even Mai is staying at the Azusagawa home. Is this what it's like to be a newlywed?



「きゅん、きゅんあー」  
シャワーは翔子の全身を  
容赦なく濡らしていく。

牧之原 翔子

拾った子猫を秋太に預けた  
12歳の中学1年生。子猫の鳴子を  
見たたびたび精神を揺る。

読者のQUESTION 03

初恋の女子高生と同じ名前、同じ顔の女子中学生。  
これって一体どういうこと？

# Prologue

*Hey, let's kiss.*

Said the girl who should have been a high school student, but after two years had become a middle school student.

In short, what on this little green Earth had happened?

# Chapter 1 — A Wonder Came to be Called a Wonder

1

Sakuta dreamed that day. He dreamed of days gone by... though it was actually only about two years in the past.

He dreamed of when he was in his third year of middle school, of the time ten days after three mysterious gouges had been carved into his chest and he had been taken to the hospital covered in blood... Sakuta had grown tired of looking at the doctor's troubled face and left the hospital before boarding a train from the nearby station.

He didn't care where it went and decided to just go to the sea because the TV show he had watched to kill time the day before had a character that had looked out to the sea with a melancholic expression. It seemed a fitting place to go with being in the doldrums.

That was how he came to Shichirigahama beach and walked through the surprisingly loud sounds of the crashing waves until he reached the water's edge.

The sea breeze carried the scent of salt, and the early-afternoon sun was pleasant on his skin. There was a path towards the sun on the surface of the sea. Was the atmosphere clear past that far off distance? He could clearly see the horizon.

He stared at the boundary between the sea and sky for a while and then noticed someone next to him.

"Did you know? The distance from a person's eye-line to the horizon is about four kilometres."

The voice was barely there and had a weak timbre, but there was a cool purpose contained within it.

Sakuta remained silent for a while and glanced to his side. Standing there was

a girl in high school uniform, holding her hair down against the wind. She was wearing a beige blazer and a navy blue skirt as she stood barefoot on the sand.

He didn't recognise her face, and didn't know her name.

Noticing Sakuta's look, the girl gave a slightly playful smile. At the very least, there was no one else around. He could see an elderly couple walking their dog, but there was no other explanation than that the girl was talking to Sakuta.

"Are the people around here all like that?" He asked her.

"Hm?" The girl tilted her head, not quite understanding the main part of his question.

"Do they all just start talking to strangers out of nowhere?"

The area was a seaside tourist destination. Enoshima was to the west, and Kamakura to the East, so there might be the culture of being friendly to visitors to make them feel welcome.

"Ah, did I make you think I'm a strange person by any chance?"

"Nope."

"Thank goodness," the girl breathed a sigh of relief.

"I just think you're annoying."

"Calling a high school girl that is a taboo," the girl pouted with her hands on her hips, apparently miffed, "annoying, lame, incapable of reading the atmosphere, those are the three great taboo insults for high school girls."

"You're an irritant then," he revised.

"And that's the fourth." The girl gave a somewhat reproachful look before carrying on. "You look rather far from home, did something bad happen?"

"About earlier," Sakuta answered, completely ignoring the actual question. It was probably this kind of attitude that a girl he had just met was telling him he looked far from home.

"Yes?"

Even with her question ignored, the girl didn't frown and instead smiled cheerfully, her expression changing from the earlier pout.



“You were talking about the horizon,” Sakuta stayed before her, still discouraged, “is it really about four kilometres?”

“It’s surprisingly close, isn’t it?”

The girl picked up a twig from the beach and drew a circle in the wet sand. Atop that circle, she added a person that consisted of a circle and a straight line before finally adding a straight line that touched the circle.

“If you use the geometry that you learn in high school, you can easily calculate the distance to the horizon.”

Using the beach as a board, the girl wrote out an equation, but it was washed away by a strong wave. Flustered, she moved a step back up the beach.

Sakuta fell back into silence and stared back at the horizon. It had seemed so distant before, but now seemed strangely close.

“Now it’s your turn to answer my question,” she said.

The moment that she said that, Sakuta had decided to ignore it, but in the end, Sakuta ended up talking to her about why he had come to the sea.

“I...”

He started by telling her that he had a sister, then that said sister had been bullied in middle school.

Once he opened his mouth, he couldn’t stop talking. He spoke of his sister getting strange cuts and bruises with the bullying, how he couldn’t do anything for his injured sister, and then eventually, even about the bizarre wound on his own chest. Finally, he finished by telling her about nothing going well... about how he had come here today to escape from the all-pervading sense of powerlessness that weighed on him.

It wasn’t that he wanted sympathy, and nor was it that he wanted comforting. He had in fact thought that the girl, who had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, would recoil and leave once she heard. Those malicious feelings were what drove Sakuta to speak. That itself was just as the girl had said, Sakuta was far from home.

“So that’s what happened.”

Surprisingly, the girl didn't show a hint of doubt, even once he had finished relating everything to her. She didn't give him sympathy or try and console him. She didn't even allude to the scars on his chest or seem to doubt that the tale was the truth, she just offered her right hand.

"I'm Makinohara Shouko, Makinohara Shouko is from the Makinohara in the 'Makinohara Service Area', and the Shouko in 'a child soaring through the sky'. What's your name?" Said the girl.

"I'm..." Sakuta opened his mouth reflexively, haltingly reaching to respond to her handshake, but before he could grasp her hand, the dream ended.

Sakuta's hand that had moved in vain within his dream touched something. A round and soft sensation filled his hand...

From there, Sakuta noticed the warmth of a body on his own, the slightly damp skin against the right side of his body. The softness and weight of it brought a girl to mind.

As these thoughts danced vaguely through his head, he felt a tongue lick his lips.

He slowly opened his eyes.

There was a fluffy white creature in front of Sakuta's eyes, a white-furred kitten that was licking Sakuta's face with its rough tongue.

There was a reason for this, it was the cat that had come to live in Sakuta's house a fortnight ago... on the last day of the school term.

He picked the white cat up off his face. However, he still couldn't get up. There was another little one... well, calling her a little one wasn't quite right, another large creature was lying across Sakuta.

She was a panda, or well, his little sister wearing panda pyjamas. She was fifteen this year, but still sometimes crawled into Sakuta's bed like this.

Atop her chest was the Azusagawa household's pet cat, Nasuno, who was a female calico cat. The source of the soft and round sensation in his hand was apparently the cat's backside and Sakuta breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't accidentally groped his sister.

Sakuta removed his hand from Nasuno and pinched Kaede's nose as it whistled slightly with her breath as she slept.

"Mgh." Came a noise from Kaede's throat as she made a pained expression, but she soon opened her mouth and maintained her oxygen supply. He considered covering her mouth too, but decided it wasn't something he should do to his teenage sister.

"Kaede, wake up," he told her instead.

"Ngh? Ah, Onii-chan, good morning," she answered, suppressing a yawn as she rubbed at her eyes.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop crawling into my bed?"

"Is it because you'll awaken to a forbidden love?"

"No, it's not."

"It's okay, I'll sink to whatever depths you want me to."

"It's just because it's too hot."

It being summer, it was the time of year when the warmth of a person's skin wasn't the slightest bit pleasant. If anything, it was the season where you wanted to avoid contact as much as possible.

Of course, his older girlfriend, Sakurajima Mai, was an exception, and he would rather be in contact with her all-year-round.

However, the world wasn't fair, and the days with no skinship from Mai continued and they had only been able to meet a few times since the holidays had begun.

Mai had gone back to show business and so was busy recording for TV dramas, adverts, and even modelling for the covers of fashion magazines, doing interviews and appearing at publicity events, so her days were filled with work.

She had said "Half of it I'll be working" about the holidays, but her schedule had been filed in the blink of an eye and she barely had any time off.

"Hah..."

It was because of this that Sakuta would sigh dejectedly once or twice

throughout the days.

“What’s wrong, Onii-chan?” Asked Kaede.

“Kaede, what day of what month is it?”

Kaede checked the digital alarm clock and then answered.

“It’s the second of August.”

“So we’re about a fortnight into the holidays.”

“We are.”

“And yet, I’ve not been able to have any *fun* with Mai-san.”

“Then do you want some fun with me?” She asked, suddenly moving her face close to his.

“No, I don’t,” Sakuta answered, pushing himself up past Kaede who still showed no sign of getting off of him.

“What’s displeasing about me!?” Kaede yelled, leaning forwards suddenly. She was awfully close to pushing him down, so Sakuta quickly got up off the bed.

“You’re being pretty desperate today.”

“That’s because I’m currently facing the largest crisis in the history of Kaedeism.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“I need to master imoutodo as soon as possible!” Kaede proclaimed loudly, with a nod at her own words.

Just what was imoutodo? Sakuta wondered to himself. Well, it was made up of the characters for ‘little sister’ and ‘way’, much like ‘kendo’ was made up of sword and way, and judo was made up of ‘gentle’ and ‘way’, so maybe it was something similar?

No, he decided,

*if I put them together like that, I can just see the organisations that deal with them phoning up to complain.*

Whilst his mind was occupied with that kind of pointless thoughts, the doorbell sounded. Looking at the clock, he could see it was ten o'clock in the morning, so he already knew who it was before he got to the door. There was only one girl that came at this hour.

"Yeah yeah, I'm coming," Sakuta said, stifling a yawn as he went to greet his guest.

The visitor was a prim and proper looking young girl with a white dress that promoted her innocence all the more.

She was twelve years old and in her first year of middle school, but her polite bow and composed greeting, "Hello, sorry to intrude," made her seem more adult and her general demeanour was polite and courteous.

She entered the hall and shed her shoes when the white cat came running from Sakuta's room to curl around her... Makinohara Shouko's feet, rubbing its back at her.

"We haven't eaten yet," Sakuta told her.

"Ah, then can I feed him?"

"Would you do Nasuno's food at the same time?"

"I will." Shouko smiled happily.

He showed her into the living room, the kitten running around underfoot.

"Onii-chan, come here a second," Kaede beckoned him as they passed past his him. Sakuta went to the living room with Shouko, then came back to Kaede.

"What?"

"Do you prefer *younger* younger sisters?" She asked, seeming near tears.

"What's with that question?"

"Are you the kind of person that prefers polite and courteous little sisters?" She continued, shooting furtive glances at the living room. Apparently, that was the largest crisis in the history of Kaedeism to Kaede.

"I'm the kind of person that prefers you as my sister."

"R-really?"



“What did you think I’d say, I-”

“T-then what is Shouko-san to you?”

“...I wonder...”

Two weeks had passed since their shocking meeting. He had speculated a lot, but there were no answers to the existence of ‘Makinohara Shouko’.

Her face was too similar to just have the same name, and a family wouldn’t give

*siblings*

the same name. At the very least, she didn’t know Sakuta, so he thought that she wasn’t the same girl as he had met two years ago. But still, Sakuta couldn’t see the first year middle school student looking after the kitten as anyone but the second year high school student he had met two years prior from her appearance, to an unthinkable extent...

There was thus one possibility he could think of.

It was some form of Adolescence Syndrome. It was usually spoken of online as some kind of false supernatural phenomenon, consisting of urban legends like ‘a person suddenly disappearing from in front of you’ or ‘being able to hear people’s thoughts’. However, Sakuta knew that it was not a simple internet rumour. Sakuta had experienced two instances since the year had begun. The first was Mai’s and the other was his junior Koga Tomoe’s.

Perhaps something similar had happened with Shouko, though there was no way to know whether it was happening now or two years ago...

“Um, Sakuta-san?” Asked the girl, turning around from where Sakuta was observing her and thinking.

“Hm?”

“I’m, uh, sorry.”

“What for?”

“For this little one,” she answered, gently stroking the kitten’s back as it ate. “I said I wanted to adopt him, but I haven’t been able to bring it up with my

parents.



Nasuno came up next to the kitten.

"I'll definitely speak to them about it, so please wait for a little longer," she said.

That was the reason the kitten was in Sakuta's home.

"Are your parents strict?"

"They're very kind to me."

"Are they bad with animals?" Sakuta suggested.

"I think they like them, they're always just as happy as me when we go to the zoo."

"Are they allergic to cats?"

"No," she shook her head.

"Do you actually live in a restaurant?" He asked, maybe it was a consideration towards hygiene or customers with allergies themselves.

"Dad has an office job and mum is a normal housewife, we're just a normal household."

"I see," was all he said, wanting to refrain from making it seem like an interrogation.

However, then Shouko spoke, "If I said 'I want a cat', then I'm sure they wouldn't object." Her face clouded slightly there. She was being oddly indirect, so though he was, of course, curious, Sakuta didn't question her, if she could put it straightforwardly from the start, Shouko wouldn't have picked this way to say it. "But, that's why I can't say it..."

He still didn't really get what she meant, but answered with, "I see."

"I'm sorry, you probably don't get what I mean."

"Yeah, not at all."

Sakuta answered with what he'd been thinking and Shouko seemed to find something about it amusing as she started to giggle.

“Well, he can stay for a while. Nasuno’s happy with it too,” said Sakuta as Nasuno licked the kitten’s face, “and you can practice how to take care of a cat here too.”

“Right!”

“Oh yeah, have you chosen a name?”

“I have,” nodded Shouko with a sudden smile.

However, she didn’t continue and they both fell silent.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?”

“Eh? Ah, right... please don’t laugh?”

“Is the name that funny?”

“I-it’s not, I think it’s normal, but... It’s Hayate.”

The cat looked up at Shouko, looking at her in puzzlement, almost like it somehow knew they were talking about it.

“He’s like a white *whoosh*, so I thought of Hayate.”

“That works, he can be Nasuno’s Tohoku buddy.”

Apparently, the connection with the Shinkansen hadn’t come through, it wasn’t worth explaining, so Sakuta just waved it off.

Shouko then played with the cats for a while before looking up as something occurred to her.

“Um,” she began with a whisper and upturned eyes. Her gaze darted to the side, behind Sakuta... where Kaede was watching from the slight opening of the door. “Does Kaede-san hate me?”

“That’s just her normal reaction to people, don’t worry about it.”

“It does worry me though,” she replied with a reasonable point of view. And now she mentioned it, it was more relevant to Sakuta too.

“Kaede,” he called out, “have you finished what you were studying today?”

“There was some stuff I didn’t get, so I want you to explain it to me,” she answered.



“Come here then.”

Clutching her books to her chest, Kaede timidly came out into the room and immediately clung to Sakuta’s back.

“And how am I supposed to teach you anything like this?”

“Here,” she said, putting her book in front of his face. The pages were on factorisation, with the calculations written out in full and all the questions solved.

“I don’t get what you don’t get.”

“I don’t get when factorising will be useful in my life.”

“It’s useful when you take an exam for the high school you want to enter,” Sakuta answered with the one time he had found a use for factorisation.

“Got it,” said Kaede in understanding, writing ‘useful in exams!’ on the book. He wondered if she really did get it and if she would be fine with that answer or if she would ask for something more concrete, but Sakuta would have no answer for her. Sakuta himself wanted to know what use differential and integral calculus would have, and trigonometry for that matter.

*Who on earth thought that up? Sine, cosine, tangent...*

, While lost in his thoughts, he felt Shouko’s gaze on him.

“What’s up?” He asked.

“Can I do my homework here too?”

“Your summer homework?”

“Yes.”

“Sure, use this table,” he answered, gesturing at the table in front of the TV.

“Thank you,” she said politely before sitting and taking a print-out of her homework from her tote bag. Apparently, she was doing maths too, the sheet having a list of simple linear equations to solve, twenty in total. A little concentration should see the whole exercise done within fifteen minutes.

In spite of this, Shouko sat stiffly in front of the sheet, her mechanical pencil held in her hand. The first question was ‘3

$x=9$ ', just dividing both sides by '3' would give ' $x=3$ ', but Shouko's hands didn't move an inch.

A minute passed like this.

Just when he thought she was about to start, Shouko stretched out a hand to her bag and took out her maths textbook. She then opened it to, of course, linear equations and began to read, her expression twisting in confusion.

"Want me to show you?" Sakuta offered, making Shouko raise her head in some surprise, "you look like you're struggling."

"I-I'm okay. I think I can do it."

She resumed her staring contest with her textbook.

After about five minutes, she started working on the first question, dividing both sides by '3' and getting ' $x=3$ '.

She then looked up at Sakuta for confirmation and he answered her with, "Correct, well done."

After that, she solved the questions smoothly, apparently now understanding what linear equations were and barely hesitating. But that itself was what Sakuta thought was strange. It didn't seem like she had just remembered what she had learnt in class, but more like she had understood a question she had seen for the first time. She finished the questions without trouble in much the same way.

"Hey," said Sakuta, causing Shouko to immediately look to him now that she had put the paper away. She still kept to the lessons of 'look at people when they talk to you' that were taught in elementary school. "Can I ask something strange?"

"Umm..." Shouko seemed slightly guarded and her cheeks were tinged red for some reason, "is it something perverted?"

"No, it's not," he told her.

"I-I see..."

He was curious about why she would think that, but getting distracted would make him lose the chance to ask, so he cut straight to the point.

“Makinohara-san, do you have an older sister?”

“I don’t.”

“Any relatives that look really similar to you?”

“I don’t think so...” The way she trailed off let Sakuta understand that she wanted to know why he was asking.

“I met someone really similar looking to you before. Well, she was older than you... so I wondered if you had an older sister or something.”

“I’m an only child,” she told him.

“I see.”

“How much older was she?”

“Hm?”

“The person that looked a lot like me.”

“She was in her second year of high school two years ago, so if she went to university, she’d be a first-year... so probably nineteen this year.”

“Nineteen...” Shouko muttered to herself. Sakuta hadn’t thought the number would have any meaning to her, but she seemed to be saying it like it did. He was probably imagining it, he figured.

“What’s up?” He asked.

“Ah, nothing... I just can’t imagine myself in university, so I was just wondering what I’d be like.”

She’d only just become a middle-schooler, so that was probably normal.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m in my second year of high school, and I can’t either.”

“I think you should start thinking about that soon, Sakuta-san,” Shouko corrected him shyly.

“Guess you’re right.”

They continued the meaningless conversation for a while before Shouko stood up just before midday, the same time she always left.

He saw her down to the ground floor and just before she left, promised, “We’re bathing Nasuno tomorrow, so you can practice with that.”

Hayate was still small so wouldn’t deal well with the water and regulating his body temperature, which meant that they would postpone bathing him.

“Look after Hayate then,” she said with a bow before starting to walk off with a small wave.

As he watched her walk off into the distance, Sakuta muttered, “So nothing new on what happened two years ago today either, huh?”

He paused for a moment and then boarded the lift again, saying “I guess I’ll talk to Futaba about it.”

## 2

After parting with Shouko, Sakuta left a little ahead of normal for his shift, heading to the electronics wholesaler building instead of going straight to the restaurant he worked at. He walked through the rows of the latest smartphones and rode the escalator straight up, without a glance at either the audio floor or the household appliances floor.

The general mood of the area changed as he reached the seventh floor, because this and the next floor were full of general bookshops.

The large floor had bookcases lined up on it, filled to bursting with books. The seventh-floor dealt in speciality books so had a large age range and a calm atmosphere, almost like a library. Sakuta walked between the shelves, checking them as he did.

He wasn’t looking for any book in particular, it was because when he had contacted Futaba Rio earlier to consult her, she had told him she was just in one of these stores and to come himself.

He couldn’t spot her anywhere. He had been sure that she’d be in the physics book corner, but the only person there was a girl with her hair up and a

Minegahara High School uniform. With no other option, he took a lap around the floor. She really wasn't there.

"It's times like this a phone would be helpful," he said to himself. He could email, phone, or even just message her and check her location in real time.

As he was passing by the physics section on his second loop, someone spoke to him from behind, "Azusagawa."

He stopped and turned around.

"Are you trying to harass me? Just walking past like that," said the girl Sakuta had spotted earlier, and on closer inspection, he could see that this was Rio.

"Futaba?"

"I guess the summer heat is getting to your head," sighed Rio. She was wearing the familiar uniform, and of course, not being in school she wasn't wearing the lab coat. But there was a separate reason that Sakuta had walked past her, even after having seen her twice.

Her hairstyle was different than usual. It normally fell casually about her shoulders, but was now tied up behind her, exposing the pale white skin of her nape that was completely untanned. Rio was always rather reserved, so that on its own was rather tempting.

"It's too hot to wear it down," Rio told him before he could ask, noticing his gaze. Even her reason was very much like her. However, Sakuta didn't just have one question, the next thing he wondered about was her eyes. "I'm not wearing glasses because I've got contacts in today," she answered before he could ask again.

With her hair up and no glasses, she was rather different from his usual impression of her. However, her disinterested answering of his question was just like her.

"Why the uniform?" He managed to ask, his last question. Rio wasn't the type to advertise herself as a high school student during the holidays.

"I'm going to school after this."

"Kunimi's at work with me, so he won't be there," he told her.



“I’m the only member of the science club, if I don’t leave  
*something*

behind, it’ll be abolished,” she told him with a reproachful glare. “What’d you want then?”

“Hm, yeah. About that-”

“Is this going to be another annoyance?” She asked as she took a book from the shelf disinterestedly, flipping through it. It was a quantum mechanics book that was far from Sakuta’s comfort zone.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“So indecisive.”

“I met Makinohara Shouko.” He got right to the point.

Rio looked up from the open book at that point, surprise in her gaze. He’d brought her up to Rio before, Shouko was his first love that he had taken the exam to get into Minegahara High School to follow. She wasn’t at the school when he arrived. There was no trace of her having graduated or even being enrolled. With those bewildering circumstances, Sakuta had ended up lovelorn, and Rio knew all of this.

Because of that, he could understand Rio’s surprise with her next words:

“So she actually existed.”

Sakuta himself had thought they would never meet again, and hadn’t dreamt of meeting her in nearly a year.

“What’s more surprising is that she’s now a middle school first-year.”

“Huh?” Said Rio in shock, nearly dropping her book.

“When I met her two years ago, she was in her second year of high school, but when I met her again on the last day of term, she was in her first of middle school.”

“Azusagawa, are you sane?”

“Unfortunately.”

“It doesn’t add up then.”

If she was in her second year of high school two years ago then assuming that she went straight to university, it would be odd for her not to be in her first year there, but being in her first year of middle school was a *regression*.

“And you?” She asked.

“She doesn’t remember me... or rather doesn’t seem to know that we’d met.”

She had actually given a full ‘first-time’ greeting immediately after they met.

Rio fell into thought with a frown.

“Azusagawa,” she said eventually, only looking at him at the corner of her eye.

“Hm?”

“Do you think she might not just be someone with the same name that looks the same?”

“That seemed like the most likely thing, yeah,” answered Sakuta, having thought so himself. He had thought so, but also thought it seemed too coincidental.

“Apparently, there are three people in the world that have the same appearance.”

“That’s just an urban legend, isn’t it.”

“Yes, just an urban legend,” Rio answered, looking away. She acted completely unconcerned, like it didn’t really concern her, but something about it stuck in Sakuta’s mind because he couldn’t see any reason it would move her. Normally she would have bluntly mocked him at this point.

“Futaba?”

“The other possibility is that she is Makinohara Shouko’s little sister and introducing herself with her sister’s name for some reason?” Rio continued with no concern, so Sakuta gave up asking after it now.

“What kind of reason would that be?” The set-up for that was far too

complex.

“Just ask her yourself.”

“If I ask too many strange questions, she’ll think I’m a weirdo.”

“And it doesn’t matter if I do?”

“I’m just saying I’d rather not.”

“It’s surprising to see you want to look good to anyone but Sakurajima-senpai.”

“Just making sure you know, but I’m not lusting after a middle-schooler.”

“That doesn’t matter. The other possibility I can give is that the Makinohara Shouko you met two years ago was through you seeing into the future from then... or something like that.”

“It wasn’t me that caused that,” Sakuta insisted. The future simulation was caused by Koga Tomoe’s Adolescence Syndrome. She was a student that went to the same school as him and was in the year below, his cute, peach-backsided kouhai.

“I don’t think it’s possible to categorically state that you weren’t the cause when you experienced it together.”

“In that case, my age doesn’t match up.”

“True, but... there’s been no harm now, has there?”

“Well, no.”

It was fundamentally different than with Mai and Tomoe. He didn’t know if this was Adolescence Syndrome, but nothing bad had happened yet. Rio closed the book and put it back, taking another from the shelf. Two girls in yukata walked past them. They were talking about some kind of reports so were probably university students here to find some reference book. Sakuta followed them with his eyes as they passed.

“Azusagawa, you’re staring,” Rio pointed out sharply.

“You wear that kind of thing to be looked at.”

“Probably not to be looked at by you though.”

“Is there some fireworks display on today?”

“Chigasaki has one.”

“Didn’t expect you to know.”

“It’s written over there,” Rio said, flicking her eyes to the wall at their side, where a poster advertising a fireworks display at Chigasaki overlooking Sagami Bay, two stations down from Fujisawa Station on the Tokaido line. It was listed for the second of August, which was indeed today.

“Oh yeah, we went to one last year.”

It was the Fireworks Display in Enoshima, held on the night of the twentieth of August to get away from the summer heat.

“We did,” Rio agreed, sending an unimpressed look after the departing girls.

“You just wore normal clothes then, Futaba.”

“You did too.”

“Me and Kunimi were looking forward to it,” Sakuta said. It was around that time that he found out that Rio had feelings for Yuuma. Actually, it was that day that he became sure of it as he saw Rio staring at Yuuma’s face as he watched the fireworks. “You should have dressed up for it.”

“Why would I have gone to all that effort to show off to *you?*”

“It would be to show Kunimi.”

Rio looked unhappily at him.

“Regardless,” she said, “it wouldn’t suit me.”

“Wouldn’t it?”

“It wouldn’t.”

“Ah, ‘cause yukata don’t suit big chests?”

With Rio, even her uniform made her size clear.

“That’s not what I mean,” Rio said, guarding her chest with the book in her hand, not wanting it to be seen too much.

“Then what did you mean?”

“I don’t need to answer you.”

“Why?”

“You already think you know, you’re just trying to get me to say it.”

“If you think you’re too plain to pull it off, you’re dead wrong.”

Her look asked him what he actually meant.

“I think wearing a yukata with your hair like that I think it’d be pretty nice.”

Her hair up like that seemed like it would go well with a yukata.

“Besides, you’ve tried wearing one before, right?” Sakuta asked.

Rio’s expression shifted into caution.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“The way you put it, you’ve probably got one.”

“What basis have you got for thinking that?” She asked, her question being much the same as an agreement.

“If you didn’t, then you’d have said so rather than saying whether it suited you or not with how you normally talk about things.”

Rio was always grounded in logic and reality.

“...You really are irritatingly observant with that kind of thing.”

“Don’t say it like you actually dislike it.”

“I have to, I really *do* dislike it.”

“How awful.”

Rio ignored Sakuta’s strained smile and pulled a book titled *The Future of Quantum Teleportation*.

“Forget it, I’m going,” she said, heading off to the tills.

“Thanks for the talk,” Sakuta called to her back.

As Sakuta parted with Rio, his shift was approaching so he headed for the family restaurant he worked at.

“Good morning,” he greeted the manager, who was standing at the till, before looking over the area. At this time of evening, there were few customers, mostly just groups of mothers taking tea, students studying for exams, and suited men working on laptops, all coming together to be a rather peaceful atmosphere.

Sakuta didn’t break stride as he stepped into the break area, he had to clock in and get changed after all.

Kunimi Yuuma, one of Sakuta’s few friends was sitting in a chair in the break room, having already arrived and had finished changing.

Yo,” he called, raising a hand as Sakuta entered.

“You get even more tanned?” Sakuta asked. They’d last met three days ago on a shared shift, Yuuma had already been tanned then, but his skin had grown darker.

“I am? Well, I went to the beach a couple of days ago.”

“With your girlfriend?”

“Yeah?”

“Ugh, so annoying.”

“What’s with that, you’ve got a ridiculously hot girlfriend too, right?”

“And she’s so busy that I haven’t seen her all week.”

“I saw her on TV yesterday.”

“Don’t worry, I see her on TV every day too.”

He didn’t know how many contracts she’d already managed to get, but she was often in adverts for soft drinks and new sweets. She was also on signboards for cosmetics and shampoos that made the best use of her beauty.

“Well, my condolences then,” Yuuma smiled mockingly at Sakuta as he came

from around the lockers.

Just as Sakuta was about to start complaining:

“Good morning,” came a familiar voice from the hall outside. The footsteps, however, were rather unfamiliar as they approached, with refined clacking noises on each step.

After a second, Koga Tomoe entered the break room. The squalid area for the two boys suddenly grew much more luxurious. Tomoe was wearing a bright yukata, zori attached to her feet with cute straps, and a goldfish-patterned pouch hanging from her hand.

“Ack, Senpai!” Tomoe exclaimed in displeasure as she saw Sakuta.

“Did you come to show off your cute yukata?” Sakuta asked, she wasn’t on the shift list for this week, so shouldn’t be here for work.

“I just hadn’t put in my plans for next week so I came to do it,” she said, taking the blank schedule from the plastic bookcase on the table before opening it. She carefully seated herself on a stool, taking care not to ruin her yukata before filling in her plans for the next two weeks. They submitted their plans like this in the schedule and they were then combined into shifts. It could all be done on phones or the like, so Sakuta was extremely grateful for an analogue method like that.

“Koga-san, you look cute in your yukata,” said Yuuma naturally in place of Sakuta, who had said nothing.

“Eh? T-thank you,” Tomoe reddened and panicked slightly, glancing at Sakuta.

“Yukata suit you,” he offered.

“That’s harassment, Senpai,” pouted Tomoe even though he’d actually praised her.

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

She’d accepted Yuuma’s praise so easily, but not his?

“You were staring at my chest.”

She covered her chest with the hand holding her pouch.



“How rude, I also took the balance of your hips and backside into account.”

“You don’t need to! Anyway, I don’t have a great chest I can rest on the obi, I’m just stumpy!”

She was just sulking about something.

Yuuma couldn’t help but chuckle as he watched them.

“When did you two get so close?” He asked.

“W-we’re not close!” Tomoe answered sullenly.

“Something happen?” Yuuma asked Sakuta with a sidelong glance.

“I made her an adult.”

“S-Senpai! Wha’cha sayin’!?”

“I see, you’re already an adult, Koga-san,” Yuuma added with a laugh.

“Even you, Kunimi-senpai...” she looked at him in betrayal. “I’ve got plans so I’m going. Excuse me, Kunimi-senpai.”

Tomoe gave a proper bow as she huffed and went to leave.

“Koga,” Sakuta called out to her back.

“Hm? What?” She asked, stopping to listen.

“Girls in yukata should keep an eye out when they’re around.”

“Senpai, that’s creepy, stopping me to say that,” said Tomoe, scrunching up her face in displeasure.

“That was just a joke.”

“What is it then?”

“I can’t see any panty lines so I wondered if you were going commando.”

“I’m just wearing ones that won’t show!”

“So a thong? Just like you.”

“I-I wouldn’t wear those! Hey, don’t imagine them!?”

Tomoe put both hands behind her back and covered herself.



“I’ve long since imagined it, so give up,” Sakuta said.

“Just so you know, they’re more complete ones, they’re like boxers.”

“Uwah, my dreams are dead, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Geez, don’t just go getting depressed after asking something embarrassing! I’m ‘censed! I’m going!”

“Ah, wait,” Sakuta called.

“You’re annoying, seriously,” Tomoe said, looking up at him with clear wariness.

“Careful if you get hit on.”

“Eh? Ah, yeah... thanks.”

“You’re cute after all.”

“Don’t call me cute,” she pouted at him.

“Okay, you’re super cute so be careful.”

“We’ll all be together so we’ll be fine. I’m gonna be late!”

This time Tomoe actually did leave, and it was just the two boys again.

“Hey, Sakuta?” Asked Yuuma.

“Hm?”

“What’s ‘‘censed’ supposed to mean?”

“Who knows?”

Sakuta followed Yuuma as they clocked in.

“Koga-san sometimes uses phrases I’ve not heard before.”

“They’re probably just ‘in’ with schoolgirls nowadays.”

Tomoe was keeping the fact that she came from Fukuoka a secret, so Sakuta gave her the help he could.

There was less footfall than usual that day, and the restaurant was quiet. It

was probably because a lot of the people that lived nearby were at the fireworks display in Chigasaki.

At just past eight, a yukata-clad family entered. Judging by their looks, they were on the way home from the display. The four or five-year-old boy was probably worn out from playing around in his hero-show patterned yukata and had his eyes half closed. There were other customers wearing yukata dotted about the restaurant too.

After taking their order, Sakuta went into the storeroom to get some straws to refill the drinks bar. He took a box down from the shelf and left the room to find himself face to face with Yuuma's smile.

"Oh, there you are, Sakuta. Go to table five next." Yuuma told him.

"Huh?"

"You'll get it when you're there."

Yuuma's smirk made him think that it wouldn't be an enjoyable experience. He'd specified the table, so it was probably someone there for him, but no one that would visit to see him really came to mind. There was the newswoman, Nanjou Fumika, but that was about it, and she hadn't shown herself for two or three months.

There was also Mai, but she had told him that she was coming back from filming in Kyoto tomorrow.

"I wonder who it is," he asked himself as he headed over.

Table five was a booth table further in to the area. As he approached he could see a silhouette from behind. They had a small carry-on case next to them, with an old-fashioned design that would have shown up in movies at the time.

When Sakuta stood next to the table, the person looked up from the menu, and when she spotted that it was Sakuta, her imperious gaze softened slightly into a smile.

"Why are you here, Mai-san?"

Indeed, sitting at table five was Sakuta's girlfriend, Sakurajima Mai. She was wearing more adult clothes than usual and had a light dusting of makeup. It

might have been to hold her back, but the presence of a skilled actress flowed from her.

Of course, the customers in nearby seats were all muttering simple impressions like 'is she the real thing?', 'her face's small', or 'huh, she goes to family restaurants'.

"I thought you were coming back tomorrow?" Sakuta asked.

"There were a lot of veterans there, and I didn't have any slip-ups either, so we finished early."

"I see, so you came back a day early so you could see me sooner?"

"I did," said Mai, turning aside Sakuta's minor provocation with an impish smile. "The hotel was already booked so I could have stayed another night and had a nice trip home, but I got my manager to buy a ticket for the bullet train. Are you happy?"

"So happy," said Sakuta monotonously.

"What's with you?" Mai frowned at him, perhaps displeased at his reaction. Sakuta pretended not to notice and opened his order terminal.

"If you're ready to order?"

She stared at him silently.

"I'll take your order," Sakuta pressed with a customer service smile.

"What are you sulking for?"

"I'm not sulking."

"You clearly are."

"And whose fault do you think that is?"

"That's, um..."

"Um?"

"...I'm sorry," Mai apologised meekly after a moment, "I'm well aware I've been an awful girlfriend that's been neglecting her boyfriend for work just after they started dating."

“Well, I wouldn’t say *awful*, but...”

“But?”

“But I *am* looking forward to your apology.”

“Fine, I’ll do something for you,” Mai allowed.

“Even something perverted?”

“Just a little.”

“I’ll forgive you then.”

“Don’t get carried away,” she said, grinding her foot into his under the table as she kept a straight face, listing out her order.

Sakuta put it all into the terminal before murmuring so only Mai could hear, “I’m really happy you came back early for me.”

“Moron, you should have said that first,” she said, her tone angry, but with a happy smile, “what time are you working to?”

“I’ve got half an hour left. Man, I want to see you home.”

It was half-past-eight now, and he finished at nine.

“I’ll wait after I finish eating, then.”

“I’ll call you when I’m done then.”

“No slacking off then, get back to work.”

“You were the one that called me.”

After voicing his complaint, Sakuta returned to the storeroom to finish his job from earlier.

Sakuta worked assiduously for the next thirty minutes and so could clock out bang on time.

“I’m going on ahead,” he called out as he finished changing and exited into the main area just as Mai was settling her bill. If he was a little later, Mai might have left on her own. They left the shop together.

“Mai-san, here,” said Sakuta, offering a hand for Mai’s carry-on as they left.

“Thanks.”

As he started pulling it along, they walked side by side.

“Is she coming every day?” Mai soon asked unconcernedly, like she was discussing the weather.

“Hm?”

“Makinohara Shouko-san.”

“She is.”

“Don’t ask when you already know what I mean,” she said, lightly pinching his cheek.

“Does it bother you?”

“Of course it does, the girl you met as a high school girl is now a middle school girl,” the aghast expression on her face all but saying ‘I’m hardly going to be jealous of a middle school girl’.

“I wish you were eaten up with it though,” Sakuta said.

“With what?”

“With jealousy, of course.”

“You’re not lusting after a middle-schooler when you have me as your girlfriend, are you?”

“I might just fall to the path of the lolicon under the pressure of a life with no dates if I don’t get a wonderful reward from you.”

“I’m letting you carry my luggage aren’t I?” She looked back at the case, “It’s got my underwear in.”

“Can I open it?”

“So you know, they’ve been washed.”

“Didn’t I tell you that I prefer them washed?”

“You didn’t?” Unfortunately, Mai’s expression was surprised.

“It isn’t the underwear themselves I want to see, it’s your embarrassment while I can see them.”

“I wouldn’t get embarrassed by something like you being able to see my underwear.”

“I can look then?”

“Enough of that, back to the point,” she told him.

“I wanted to flirt more with you though, it’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.”

“You can do that as much as you like later,” Mai said with a sigh.

“Ehh, but I wanted to now,” Sakuta whined.

“Fine fine, I’ll hold your hand.”

“We’re not a middle school couple, that wouldn’t satisfy me, would it?”

“Ah, okay then,” Mai said, withdrawing her hand. Sakuta reached after that hand and took it rather than answer. Mai immediately intertwined her fingers with his, squeezing gently.

“This is fine, right?” She asked.

Sakuta didn’t answer.

“What are you going so quiet for?”

“I just thought you were super cute,” Sakuta answered.

“I know that,” she said shortly, but she seemed somewhat embarrassed as she looked away, “So?”

She directed the conversation back to the original topic, still facing forwards. Of course, this was asking about how things were going with Shouko.

“She comes every day to look after the cat.”

“Anything strange happen?”

“Not really.”

“Did you figure anything out?”

“I talked to Futaba earlier, but nothing. She just shot me down saying that she’s probably just someone with the same name.”



“Of course. I think the same... Besides, is she that similar to the girl you met?”

“She’s younger than I remember, so I couldn’t say for sure, but well, if she keeps growing I guess so. Her personality seems rather different though.”

Maybe it was because she wasn’t used to him, but Shouko now felt much more reserved than then. The high school girl from two years ago hadn’t felt that way at all and was quick to close the distance between them.

“Hmm,” noised Mai ambivalently. She hadn’t known the girl from back then, so just listening to Sakuta talk about her didn’t entirely help.

“I shouldn’t worry about it unless it’s causing harm like it was with you, that’s what Futaba said at least.”

“Okay, if you’re fine with that,” she said, not really agreeing at all.

Mai’s mouth then opened for a second as she stopped.

“Mai-san?”

“Isn’t that Futaba-san?” She asked, pointing at a nearby convenience store.

The high school girl walking out with a carrier bag was indeed Rio. She was wearing her school uniform when they met earlier, but was now wearing a baggy t-shirt and a pair of trousers. Her hair was no longer tied up either and fell in its usual artless way about her shoulders, she was even wearing her glasses again.

“What’s she doing...?”

Looking closely, he could see that the bag she was carrying was flat-bottomed, so had a box of food inside. When he noticed that, a sense of unease suddenly welled up within him. Rio normally wasn’t the type to participate in the city’s nightlife, so her walking around the business district after nine at night was odd. Besides, it would take a while for her to get food from the convenience store by Fujisawa Station as she had rather than one stop up on the Odakyu-Enoshima line where she lived in Honkugenuma which also caught his attention.

More than anything, the amount of attention she was paying to her surroundings, seeming to try and avoid people, which actually made her all the

more noticeable.

“Mai-san, mind if we make a stop?” He asked.

“Going to interfere?”

Her tone was condemning, but she was the one that followed after Rio first.

Sakuta and Mai followed Rio back towards the station to a seven or eight storey building, seeing her enter it. Looking up at the building, they could see that there was a bank, a bar, and a net cafe in there. Amongst them, the bank was closed and the staff at the bar would turn her away, so they knew her destination.

However, even the net cafe had a curfew for high school students of ten PM. Her time would be limited, but the meal made it seem like she might be planning to stay the night.

“Mai-san, would you wait here?” Sakuta asked. Taking a celebrity like her in would cause far too much of a tumult.

“I’ve never been in one,” she said, apparently set on going in with him, and brooking no argument.

With no choice, he and Mai boarded the lift.

They rode the lift up to the seventh floor and, after waiting for the automatic doors to open, entered the net cafe. The harsh pressure of the lighting transitioned into a chic and calm set of interior decorations.

“Welcome,” said the receptionist in her twenties, her tone fit the atmosphere of the cafe as well. Even as she looked curiously at Mai as she peered about curiously behind Sakuta, she continued, “how much time would you like?”

There was a list of costs on the counter, with the costs for ‘three hours’, ‘five hours’ and ‘until morning’ listed one after another.

Sakuta pointed at the top row saying, “This please.” The first thirty minutes was two hundred yen, and then the costs increased with the amount of time used. They were only there to look for Futaba, so thirty minutes should be plenty.

He finished paying, buying Mai’s time as well and accepting the two vouchers.

Mai herself was in the drinks corner, looking at the ice cream machine.

“We can have one once we find Futaba.” Sakuta told her.

“How much are they?”

“They’re free once you pay the basic usage fee.”

Well, strictly speaking, the cost was included. There were carbonated drinks, oolong tea, orange juice, and a coffee maker and espresso machine. There was a similar lineup to a family restaurant, and it had an ice cream machine so was better if anything.

Sakuta went as if he was going to move to the seats and wandered into the inner area. The centre of the space was filled by bookcases with manga lined up on the shelves. As if surrounded by them, there were rooms with numbers written on each.

Let alone Rio, there were no other customers there either, apparently, everyone was in their individual rooms. The only noise was the periodic clack of keyboards. There was no way to know where Rio was like this.

He thought about asking the receptionist, but of course she wouldn’t tell them anything about another customer.

“If you remember her number, you can phone her,” Mai suggested, holding out her bunny-cased phone to him. Even as he took the phone, Sakuta’s gaze was focused on Mai’s other hand.

She was holding a shallow cup with a coil of soft-serve ice cream. He’d said ‘once we find Futaba’, but she hadn’t listened at all. That was just like her.

She used a small plastic spoon to scoop up some of the ice cream and held it in front of Sakuta’s mouth.

“Here, open wide,” she said.

Just as she said, he opened his mouth, thinking it would be a trap, but she really did feed it to him.

“Is it tasty?” She asked.

“It is,” he replied, prompting a satisfied smile from Mai as she filled the spoon

again, moving it to feed Sakuta once more.

“Didn’t you make it because you wanted to eat it?”

“I just ate earlier, so I’m full.”

“So that’s how it is?”

“What? If you don’t like this you can eat it yourself?”

Apparently, Sakuta finishing it was a foregone conclusion, in which case, he’d rather she fed him.

Wordlessly, he opened his mouth and Mai forced all of the ice cream left onto the spoon and then into his mouth.

He felt a sharp spike of pain through his head like when he ate shaved ice. When Mai saw that, she muttered, “There’s no helping you,” and returned to the drinks corner and brewed him an espresso.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

He blew on it and once he had downed the whole drink, he binned the paper cup and returned the coffee cup to the slot. Once done with this, he punched in Rio’s phone number to Mai’s phone.

The call connected in the middle of the second ring.

“Yes?” Answered Rio’s voice warily. Probably because of a phone call from an unfamiliar number.

“It’s me.”

“Why are you calling from a mobile?”

“I borrowed Mai-san’s.”

“If you’re going to show off, find someone else,” was her reply, mixed with a sigh. It was her usual reaction, but was too natural and didn’t seem to be close.

“What did you want then another annoyance?”

“Am I just synonymous with annoyance to you?”

“That’s right, your existence is an annoyance.”

“Hey-” Sakuta began to retort as a door opened behind him.

“...Sakuta, look,” said Mai, poking his shoulder.

Sakuta turned unconcernedly and met the gaze of the customer just leaving their room. In that moment, an uneasiness filled his body.

It was Rio. The person Sakuta was looking for. She wasn't holding a phone, and nor did she have an ear-piece in. His ear was filled with the sound of someone talking.

“Azusagawa, what's wrong?” He heard from the phone.

The Rio in front of him, however, had only looked at him in slight surprise and not moved her lips in the slightest.

“Ah, sorry, Futaba, the phone's flat, I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Ah, okay. I don't mind if you don't exactly rush.”

“See you.”

He touched the screen as he moved the phone from his ear, ending the call before raising his eyes from the phone and meeting Rio's gaze again.

She immediately went back into the room.

“Ah, wait!” Sakuta called. Heedless though, Rio firmly shut the door. He moved to the door she had shut herself behind and knocked lightly.

“Futaba?”

No reply came.

“You can't pretend you're not there in this kind of situation.” He told her, prompting the lock to rattle and the door to slowly open.

Rio exited. She was without a doubt Sakuta's friend Futaba Rio. She was wearing baggy trousers with large side pockets and a similarly loose T-shirt with a striped tank top beneath.

“Was it me you were on the phone to?” She started off with what would sound like an utterly bizarre question but was perfectly valid in this situation and something Sakuta himself wanted to ask.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Then there’s no use trying to hide it.”

Rio’s tense expression twisted in defeat.

Rio had said, “Let’s talk outside,” so Sakuta returned his and Mai’s vouchers to the receptionist and left the building. Rio stopped in between the JR station building and the passageway to the Fujisawa Enoden Station. Then began to talk detachedly.

“There are two of me,” she started with.

Rio watched the people walking through the passageway as she rested both of her hands on the handrail.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said, there have been two Futaba Rios since three days ago.”

He understood what was being said was absurd. He understood, but couldn’t bring his mind to deny it. On the phone earlier he had been, without a doubt, been talking to Rio. The same Rio he knew so well. And then there was another Rio in front of him, a Futaba Rio.

“Is it Adolescence Syndrome?” Asked Mai.

Rio turned back and spoke: “Though I’d rather not admit it.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“If I did, I’d have already dealt with it.”

“Well yeah, you would have.”

A question suddenly came to mind as he listened. Her hair around her shoulders and her glasses marked her as having a different outfit than the Rio he had met at lunch.

“So I met the other one at lunchtime?” He asked.

“I haven’t met you today, so yes.”

“I see...”

“That *fake*

is such a nuisance. She's just going about my life at home, so I can't even go home myself, my parents finding out would be bad in several ways."

"Yeah," Sakuta answered.

Her parents probably wouldn't be able to understand suddenly having two daughters.

"On top of that, the *fake*

is going to school and throwing herself into club activities."

"Futaba was wearing her uniform when I met her and said she was doing club work after that."

"That just makes going out even more dangerous. If anyone that knows me sees me, it'll be awfully inconvenient. I've just got to hide for a while."

"So that's why you were in the net cafe. That's a bit of a--"

"I don't have the money to stay in a hotel," Rio added, not sure how long he'd carry on.

"Are you a moron?" Asked Sakuta.

"It's humiliating to be called a moron by *you*," said Rio.

"Just call me straight away."

Rio's sarcastic smile faded as she seemed to notice that Sakuta was actually angry, and she couldn't answer.

"Think about it, you're a high schooler, right? And you were thinking of staying in a net cafe for days at a time? Are you sane?"

The rooms might have locks, but that was no guarantee of safety. It might be fine for a male, but something might happen to a girl. There were men that would aim for a girl that had all but ran away from home. It might be because of a serious reason, but Rio's choices were too reckless.

Besides, the staff would have eventually noticed she was a high school student and she wouldn't be able to continue like that forever. They might contact the police, who would then do the same to her parents, outing her in one fell swoop.

Rio seemed to be regretting what she'd done and was just looking wordlessly at the ground.

"Say, Futab-ah!" As Sakuta was about to continue, Mai poked Sakuta's head from the side.

"Mai-san," he turned to her, "I know you're bored without the attention, but this is import-ow ow ow!"

This time, she yanked on his ear.

"She can't just call you that easily," Mai told him, her eyes telling him that he didn't get anything, "You don't understand any of this," she finished, saying it verbally too.

"Umm, what do you mean?"

"Let's say that she did and explained everything to you, what would you do?"

"Well, let her stay at mine."

"You're a man too though."

"Well, yeah, but..."

"You probably know her quite well, would she call up a boy and ask to stay at their home?"

"Honestly, I doubt it," he answered honestly, gaining a large sigh from Mai.

"That's what men are like."

"Sorry," he apologised.

"That's what *you're* like."

But, you know, Futaba's a friend, I wouldn't do anything weird."

"Hehhh, so you wouldn't have any perverted feelings if a girl that had just gotten out of the bath was in your room."

"I would."

"Don't just jump in with an awful answer like that," she jabbed him in the forehead.

"Well, of course imagining her in just a bath towel would give me sexual



feelings.”

“I didn’t tell you to imagine her,” said Mai with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Rio herself was looking at him with displeasure in her gaze.

“Of course, you were the model I imagined, Mai-san.”

“That’s fine then.” She answered.

“Fine.”

Ignoring Sakuta, Mai turned back to Rio.

“You’ve been found out, will you rely on Sakuta?” She asked her. Her tone was not quite pushy, not quite gentle as her adult nature suddenly came to the fore. She was only a year ahead of them in school, but at times like this, Mai’s seniority and composure really showed. “If you keep being stubborn now, Sakuta will just think you’re being childish.”

He didn’t know if she didn’t want that, but Rio let out a small sigh and looked at him.

“Azusagawa.”

“Sure you can.”

“I didn’t even say anything yet,” said Rio, breaking into a smile now her nerves had settled.

“So then, Mai-san.”

“What?”

“Futaba’s staying at mine for a while, is that okay with you?” He asked, just to make sure.

However, Mai’s answer was, “No.”

“Huh?”

He really didn’t get what she meant, she herself seemed to have been pointing Rio towards staying with Sakuta, gently cutting off any means of escape for her.

“Why are you surprised?” Mai asked.

“‘Why’ is what I’d like to ask you,” he said, truly not understanding it.

“Are you really asking that?” She asked, her gaze seeming to call him an idiot. No, there was no ‘seeming’ to it, her gaze was calling him an idiot. “I’ll ask you then... if I said a male friend was staying with me, would you be okay with it?”

“I don’t even want to imagine it, seriously.”

“Right?”

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

But what would they do about Rio now? He folded his arms in thought, almost mockingly, Mai smoothly said, “That’s why I’ll be staying too.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, let’s go pick up Futaba-san’s things,” she said, walking back towards the net cafe without waiting for his reply.

Rio and he exchanged looks before following after her.

“That went surprisingly well,” Rio said with a glance at him.

“Don’t look at me like I’m whipped.”

“Well done, you got it,”

“This kind of thing makes relationships go well,” Sakuta defended.

“Making excuses like that, how fitting for a low-life.”

Sakuta followed after Mai while feeling Rio’s scornful gaze wash over him.

## 4

When Sakuta arrived home, he explained the situation to a sleepy Kaede. Skipping past Adolescence Syndrome when it would come up, he got her agreement to have Mai and Rio stay.

“You brought another new girl home...” Kaede murmured.

“My reputation’s awful, huh?”

“B-but, I’m your little sister, so I’m prepared to accept that you’re like that as well.”

Kaede was nervous at first, but her wariness towards Rio soon faded. She seemed to find a sense of security in Rio’s relatively subdued nature, and she was already used to Mai with her having come over on several occasions, so that was probably a big part of it.

With Kaede’s agreement, they now had to decide the order they would bathe. Kaede had already done so, so it was between Sakuta, Mai, and Rio.

“I’ll go last,” Sakuta suggested, purely out of the kindness of his heart, but Mai and Rio both reacted in distaste.

“I feel like I’d get pregnant,” Mai said.

“Mai-san, what logic are you working on there?”

“I’ll go home for a while to deal with my luggage, so I’ll have a bath there. I want to get a change of clothes too.”

She declared unilaterally before leaving.

“You’re first then, Azusagawa.”

“I see, so you think that I’m a pervert that would get aroused over bathwater that a girl had soaked in?”

Going out of his way to protest it wouldn’t help, so Sakuta bathed first. After ten minutes in the bath, he came out into the living room to switch with Rio, who was sitting meekly on the settee.

After a while, he realised that he had forgotten to leave a towel out for Rio and took a laundered and folded towel into the dressing area.

The steam in the air told him that Rio was already in the bath behind the door.

“Futaba,” he called out to her, garnering a large splash in return.

“W-what?” She asked in an unusually flustered voice. Apparently, she had recoiled at his call and taken refuge in the bath water. Maybe she thought he would open the door or something, not trusting him at all.

“I’m leaving a towel here.”

“Right.”

“Do you have a change of clothes?” He asked.

The things they had retrieved from the net cafe were all contained in a large tote bag.

“I do.”

“If you don’t, I can lend you a bunny suit or panda pyjamas.”

“I just told you I do.

Of course, she wouldn’t wear the bunny suit, but Kaede had many spare sets of pyjamas so he’d really like to see Rio wearing them.

“I can wash the clothes you were wearing earlier, right?”

The washing machine had Sakuta and Kaede’s washing in it, he tossed Rio’s shirt in too and switched it on. It filled with water and started going about its work.

“I’m capable of wa... Wait, that sound, it’s already going?”

“It’s filling now.”

“T-the underwear?”

“Hm? Are you the type that doesn’t like her washing in with guys’ underwear?”

Unfortunately, Sakuta’s underwear was in there too.

“I-I was talking about *mine*!”

“I’ll need to hand-wash them, right? I know that.”

The bra and panties that Rio had been wearing today were in the basket, and Sakuta reached out his hand to the soft-looking pale yellow fabric.

“You don’t know anything! Don’t look at them! Don’t touch them! Get out!”

“This is my house.”

“I meant of the changing room.”

“All that aside, are you okay?”

“I will be once you leave.”

Sakuta gave up on washing the underwear and sat down with his back to the washing machine with a slight grunt of effort.

“What are you settling down for out there?” She asked.

“I was asking about your Adolescence Syndrome.”

Rio probably knew that as well, her long silence before she answered was proof of it.

“...I don't really know.” Was her eventual, unsure response, with a somewhat reserved tone.

“Is that all?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing really, I just wanted to hear your frank opinions.” The situation was making even Sakuta's skin crawl, and he wasn't the one affected, there was no way that Rio didn't feel anything about this.

“I'm... a little scared,” she said, shifting in the bathwater.

“Only a little?”

“When I was alone in the net cafe, I was really scared,” she answered, her voice shaking with the memory of those emotions.

There was another of her. She was trapped in fear of a situation that no-one had experienced, of course she would be scared.

“But is all this even possible? I mean, one person becoming two?”

Sakuta remembered a rumour of something like that spreading for a while when he was in elementary school. The rumour of a doppelgänger and that you'd die if you met them, the very picture of an urban legend.

He didn't feel like laughing at it in this situation though.

“It might be, if quantum teleportation holds true in the macroscopic world.”

“The word quantum just makes me twitch.”

“And teleportation?”

“That’s a thing in sci-fi stories, right?”

“No, it actually happens.”

“Seriously?”

Teleportation was a term that was solely confined to stories for Sakuta.

“We talked about quantum entanglement before, yes?”

“Yeah, something about distant particles sharing stuff?”

He certainly did remember talking about two particles becoming entangled and sharing information instantaneously.

“Right, so if I were to adapt that to this situation and put it simply... Say that there was an information framework that I was made up of.”

“That’s *simple*?” He interjected, already feeling the twitches.

“Now say that framework was instantaneously transmitted to another location.”

“So like the information of you in my bath getting transmitted to school?”

“That works. The framework at school becomes definite when it’s observed by someone, so becomes the Futaba Rio that you know,” she explained.

“Observation theory, huh.”

“I’m impressed you remember.”

“Well, I keep hearing about it.”

In the quantum world, everything was defined by observation, until then, everything was just a probability... apparently.

However, his understanding of it was just the surface level, he didn’t really feel like he truly understood it. Bringing teleportation into it now had no difference from saying ‘magic exists’ to him.

“But at that point, two of you wouldn’t be able to exist, would they?”

Quantum teleportation was different than copying something.

“That’s true... I’m impressed you realised without it being explained.”

“Well once it’s observed, it’s not a probability, so it can’t be in both places? If the framework is observed in my bath, you’re there, and not at school, yeah?”

“I really am surprised, you actually understood it,” she told him.

“I had a good teacher.”

“But yes, you’re right. I actually haven’t seen the other me.”

“Eh?”

“So when you ask if there’s two of me at the same time, I can’t state conclusively there are. I just think there’s something that looks the same as me in a different place, doing different things. My room and phone match that hypothesis, there were changes and marks that I don’t remember making.”

“So if I keep observing you, another you can’t exist?”

“If you were the observer that defined my existence, maybe. Strictly speaking... it might be that ‘as long as the one if being observed, that observer cannot observe the other’...”

“Hm? I don’t get it.”

“It’s talking about multiple viewpoints. In this situation... Sakurajima-senpai could see the *fake* outside.”

“Right.”

“It’s possible that if she then brought that *fake* here, in the world you and I can see, the *fake*

wouldn’t be here. Conversely, in the world that Sakurajima-senpai could see, I wouldn’t be here.”

“...That seems ridiculous,” said Sakuta, and it really did.

“It is. In that situation, with the worlds that you and Sakurajima-senpai see not agreeing, it would create a paradox.”

“But when we met at the net cafe, I was talking to the other you on the

phone, and you were right in front of me.”

“Were they really me?” She asked meaningfully.

“It was you.”

“Definitely?”

“Well, I couldn’t see her for sure.”

“So you can say that it wasn’t ‘definitively the same existence as me’. In other words, the

*me*

on the other end of the phone had undefined factors.”

“So you could exist at the same time?”

“This is all supposition in the end, just one possibility. It might just be pure chance that I haven’t encountered the

*fake*

. I can’t discard the possibility that other people can see both of us at once.”

“Then you really can’t go out carelessly.”

In one way or another, letting the students see that there were two of Rio would be an issue. It would need some kind of explanation, and he didn’t think they’d be able to pass themselves off as twins.

“Ah,” he realised, “but that quantum teleportation thing? Wouldn’t have the same memories and consciousness whichever of you was observed?”

If the observation simply defined the location, then once they returned, the information wouldn’t change from being ‘Futaba Rio’. If they had separate memories and consciousnesses then there would have to be two existences calling themselves ‘Futaba Rio’.

“This is just a hypothesis, but...” Rio began before trailing off, making the washing machine sound all the louder.

“Futaba?” He pushed the conversation gently on.

“If... If I myself was the existence observing ‘Futaba Rio’, but there were two



consciousnesses of me performing that observation, that might explain this.”

“Is that like a split personality?” Sakuta asked.

“There’s not that much separation I think.”

“If that was the case... why?”

“I told you that I didn’t know about that.” Rio insisted.

“Did you have a big shock, or were you under some kind of stress?”

“You can ask that kind of thing oddly easily. Even I’ve heard of that kind of thing causing damage to the consciousness and memories though.”

Sakuta had experienced something like that before when Kaede was bullied two years ago, he had seen the intense stress at the time being a negative influence on physical health.

“Well, I’ve talked a bit about it before, yeah.”

“...About your mother?” Asked Rio in a voice that seemed unsure of *how*

to ask. He had talked to Rio about his mother’s reaction to Kaede’s bullying before, and how she had been taken to the hospital.

“That’s right.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine, I was the one that brought it up.”

“Right... Now, Azusagawa.”

“Hm?”

“I want to get out, the heat’s gone to my head.”

“Got it,” Sakuta answered, still sitting in front of the washing machine.

“That means get out,” came Rio’s fed up voice. It echoed around the bathroom, doubling how unhappy she sounded. Sakuta rose without complaint.

“I’ll leave, but you can stay as long as you like.”

“...Uh, sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Thinking that it was just like her not to simply say ‘thank you’, Sakuta left the changing area and firmly closed the door.

As he did, the doorbell rang as Mai returned.

“Right, right, on my waaayyy,” he called.

When Rio was done in the bath, the next topic was who would sleep where. Sakuta and Kaede lived in a two-bedroom flat, there were only the two beds, one in each of their rooms. They did have bedding for a guest so could comfortably house three.

“I think that Mai-san and Futaba-san can use Onii-chan’s room, and Onii-chan can sleep with me,” Kaede suggested.

“Denied,” said Sakuta, brushing the suggestion aside. In the end, Kaede was in her own room, Mai and Rio would use Sakuta’s room and the guest bedding, and Sakuta would crash in the living room. It was a reasonable conclusion... but then again there weren’t really any other options to begin with.

“Good night.”

Once the two doors had closed, Sakuta turned the lights off and lay down in front of the TV.

There was still a faint light from the LED bulb on the ceiling, and the hum of the fridge filled the silence. Even lying there with his eyes closed, he couldn’t immediately fall asleep.

After a while, he heard a door open, his own room’s judging by the direction of the sound. The footsteps, that Sakuta had originally thought were heading to the toilet, approached Sakuta, before finally stopping next to him.

*And then*

, he felt someone lie down next to him. He didn’t think Rio would ever do something like that, so he opened his eyes, thinking it was probably Mai.

Just as he thought, Mai’s beautiful face was near his as he lay on the floor. Even the dim light let him clearly see the contours of her face, and see that she was somehow enjoying herself.

“Mai-san?”

“Hm?” She asked, even her voice was in high spirits.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at your face,” she answered.

“Well, I can see that.”

“I’m looking at my boyfriend’s face.”

That was just unfair, his heart thudded within his chest, waking him up even more.

“Heart skipped a beat, huh?” Her eyes sparkled teasingly at him.

“You seem in a good mood, Mai-san.”

“I finally got to spend some time with my boyfriend, and I’m even staying at his place, of course I am,” her act had some poorly concealed mischievousness, and her eyes had a spark of dissatisfaction. The very moment he noticed that, Mai reached out her hand and pinched his nose.

“What about Futaba?” He asked with a nasal voice.

“She’s sound asleep. I doubt she’s been able to sleep well for the last few days.”

“I see.”

Staying in a net cafe for several days certainly would wear on a girl’s mind, and he had a feeling Rio would be particularly sensitive to that.

“So you’re more worried about Futaba-san than me when I’m right in front of you.”

“It was just because you seemed in a bad mood, so I thought I’d be serious...”

Apparently, that was a mistake too.

“Hahhhhh, and I thought we could go on a date seeing as I have the entire day off tomorrow,” said Mai as she turned away, finally releasing Sakuta’s nose,

“That’s why you came home a day early?”

Mai didn’t confirm or deny his thought, just stared at Sakuta in displeasure, so

he was sure he was right.

“Why are you talking like we can’t now though?” He asked.

“Well, you’re going to be looking into Futaba’s issue, right?” Asked Mai, hitting the nail right on the head.

“The ‘fake’ should be at school for the science club tomorrow I think, so well, I was going to see what was going on.” He admitted, knowing there was no use in trying to hide it. He wanted to check whether there really were two of Futaba Rio.

“See, I knew it.”

“On that note, I have a favour to ask.”

“No,” denied Mai before he even finished speaking, “you’re just going to ask me to watch the ‘real Futaba-san’ while you go to the ‘fake Futaba-san’.”

“That’s my Mai-san, you know me so well.”

Taking the real Rio to school and putting them both in the same place would be the fastest method, but that carried risks with it. If someone witnessed it, it would cause issues and a panic.

There was also Rio’s hypothesis that it would be impossible to see them together. That coupled with the urban legend about doppelgängers as well meant that he felt it would be better if they didn’t meet each other.

“Don’t be so happy about it,” she said, pinching his cheek.

“Ow, ow.”

“Don’t enjoy that.”

“So yeah, please, Mai-san.”

Mai fell silent and released his cheek.

“Then we’ll be even.”

“For you abandoning me for a while?”

“That’s right.”

“Ehhh.”

“Of course we will be.”

“As thanks, I’ll do anything you ask, so leave the apology as an apology.”

“I’m lying next to you now.”

“I’d prefer something that rhymed with ‘amiss’.”

Mai seemed utterly shocked.

“Oh, did you not get it?”

Of course she got it, it was because she did that she was shocked, after all, ‘a kiss’ rhymed with ‘amiss’.

“It’s not like it’d need to be an apology if you chose the time, place, and mood properly, I wouldn’t mind you taking the initiative.”

Mai’s eyes had an impish glint about them as she started, but by the time she finished, she looked away in embarrassment.

“Mai-san?”

“W-what?” She asked, forcing herself to look up at him.

It’d be okay now. It’d probably be fine. If it was, Mai would just scold him, and that was a reward for Sakuta in its own way, so there was no reason to hesitate.

Their gazes locked.

A second passed, then another... then after a third, Mai’s eyes fluttered shut.

Sakuta leaned forward to kiss her, and at the same time, Mai tilted her head forwards slightly in embarrassment. Because of that, her forehead was further forwards than her lips, and both of their foreheads collided with a thunk.

“That hurt,” said Mai with a sulky glare.

“It’s because you looked down in embarrassment.”

“I-it’s because you’re too greedy,” she complained at him, sitting up.

“Mai-san?”

“That’s all for today,” she said. He couldn’t really see her face, but he had the feeling it was dyed slightly red.

“Ehh,” having it be put off after coming this far was painful.

“It’s because you suck.”

“Uwah, that hurts. I’ll lose my confidence as a man and end up scared of women.”

“That won’t happen,” Mai denied flatly.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I’ll let you practice until you can do it well.”

“...Mai-san.”

“What? You don’t want to?”

“I really love you.”

“I know,” she said. Her tone sounded bored, but there was a smile on her face as she looked back at him. “Good night then,” she finished, standing up.

“Right, good night.”

Mai went back into his bedroom with a small wave and Sakuta closed his eyes as the door shut,

Though that aside, he didn’t think he’d sleep soon. Asking him not to get worked up by Mai’s words and actions was unreasonable. There was something else bothering him as well.

Rio went through his mind, the Rio he had talked to at lunchtime, and the Rio in Sakuta’s bedroom.

The Rio sleeping in his room called the other a ‘fake’. If he could agree, then maybe he wouldn’t be bothered by it, but Sakuta had a different impression.

*They both seem like Futaba Rio*, he thought to himself.

If one was a fake, they could just get rid of them, but he didn’t think the situation was so simple, and

*that* was what was bothering him.

But if both were real, that would cause problems, at home, at school, and probably even with society itself, they wouldn’t be able to accept that there

were two Futaba Rios. Sakuta could feel it in his bones, so his heart wouldn't settle.

“Ahh, damn. Remembering Mai-san in her bunny outfit is definitely the best at times like this.”

# Chapter 2 — Youth is a Paradox

1

He looked out at the sea. He from two years prior sat on the stairs down to the sand, gazing vaguely out into the waves.

It was a dream of Shichirigahama beach he had seen over and over. So even in his sleep, Sakuta was sure that this was a dream.

He knew how things would progress from here, Shouko should get there soon.

“You seem tired again today, Sakuta-kun,” said Shouko, skipping to his side and sitting next to him.

“And you’re still a touch annoying,” he answered.

“Is coming to the sea each day not soothing your aching heart?”

“Knowing how far it is to the horizon is the problem.”

Even though the horizon seemed so distant, it was actually only a mere four kilometres. It probably taught some lesson about how things that seemed so far away were actually surprisingly close.

“Oh my, I can feel the responsibility. How can we get you back to being happy? I’ll do what I can to help,” she suggested, looking into Sakuta’s face from the side. As she did, her flowing swayed to the side as she tilted her head adorably.

“I think I’ll be happy again if I can touch your breasts,” Sakuta returned negligently.

“Will that really make you happy again?” She asked with a doubtful look.

“It will.”

“But, I’m... not exactly big?” She questioned with upturned eyes.

Sakuta didn’t reply and just kept looking at her, her cheeks steadily growing redder.



“...J-just a little,” she finally allowed.

“I was just joking, don’t take it so seriously please,” Sakuta retracted, seeing as it seemed like she actually would let him at this rate.

“I know that much.”

“Reaaaalllly?”

“Though if it would actually make you feel better, I have an idea.”

Shouko smiled like an older sister might.

“Don’t be so confident with that size would you.”

“You’ve done it now!” She exclaimed, getting fired up, circling behind him. With a short yell, she jumped at his back, putting her arms around him over his shoulder. Of course, this meant that Shouko’s chest pressed into his back. Thanks to that, Sakuta’s entire concentration was focused there.

“Shouko-san,” he said.

“What could you want?”

“You have more than I thought.”

“That’s right, that’s right,” she answered into his ear with a satisfied voice.

“Well, it’s still only more than I *thought*.”

“Your heart’s pounding away and you’re such a stick in the mud.”

“Yours is too,” he pointed out, but even with that, she didn’t move away from him for a while. They just looked out at the sea, talking in drips and drabs as they remained in their positions. Their conversation wandered, and Sakuta felt himself relax with the heat from Shouko’s body. Because of that, he didn’t know what had prompted the topic, but just thought that the conversation had naturally ended up this way as Shouko said:

“You feel guilty for not being able to help your sister, don’t you?”

“...Is that so bad?” He asked in turn.

“It’s not bad, just if you’re not happy, I think it will be tough on your sister. She’ll think it’s her fault that your smile died and be sad because of that.”

“It’s not Kaede’s fault she was bullied.”

“Even so.”

Sakuta had no answer for her.

“The feeling of an apology is important you know?” She continued. “It’s important, but if a person has those feelings directed at them constantly, they’ll be crushed under the weight of the apology.”

“What should I do then?”

“What words do you like to hear?”

Again, he had no answer.

“Do you like to hear ‘sorry’?”

“I don’t.”

“I don’t like to either. ‘Thank you’, ‘you fought hard’, and ‘I love you’ are the words I like to hear, my three great lovable phrases.”

Shouko slightly tightened the grip she had on him from behind, embracing him closely. It made it a little hard to breathe, but it was pleasant and warm.

“You fought hard, Sakuta-kun.”

“Wha!?”

Sakuta’s heart thudded at her words into his ear.

“You fought so hard for your sister.”

A burning blossomed behind his eyes at her continuation and by the time he realised what was coming, it was too late. In the blink of an eye, tears welled forth from Sakuta’s eyes.

He hadn’t been able to rely on anyone, hadn’t been able to ask anyone for help, and had been able to do nothing but watch as his sister’s body was covered in wounds by Adolescence Syndrome. No matter how much he had wanted to do something, he couldn’t, no one even believed in the mysterious phenomenon that was assailing her.

Sakuta had explained what was happening, but no one would listen. His

parents hadn't accepted reality and the school teachers began avoiding responsibility, none of his friends would approach them. The harder he tried, the more the surrounding people distanced themselves from Kaede and him. They were just seen as people who couldn't read the atmosphere. It was painful, tiring, unavoidable, and just frustrating.

"I..."

"You fought plenty hard enough."

Those words broke right through the dam of his feelings, and he couldn't stop his tears from flowing. He had thought that no one would understand, but here was someone that did. Someone that understood... It was a purely happy feeling, it itself becoming the feeling that saved him.

"Shouko-san, I..."

He tried to let the waves of his emotions turn his head around, but he couldn't, instead, he suddenly found his cheeks both held tightly, stopping him from moving his head...

Sakuta awoke, remembering the pressure on his face.

His right cheek was hot, his left was too. They were both stinging like he'd been slapped.

As he opened his eyes to that pain, and the first thing he saw was Mai's upside-down face.

Her expression of displeasure ruined the look of the apron she actually *had*

worn. She was upside-down because she was squatting just above Sakuta's head as he lay on his back, her hands holding his head between them.

"I'm sorry," he said, starting with an apology as his mouth was crushed up into a circle.

"What for?"

"Umm..." He had a single idea, that he had called a name he shouldn't have, while sleep-talking.

“I’m sure you can infer the reason?” He suggested hesitantly.

“I was just angry at seeing you sleeping so peacefully when we were under the same roof,” she lied with pursed lips as she looked away.

“Because you couldn’t really sleep in your boyfriend’s house?”

“Staying over at my younger boyfriend’s house doesn’t really matter,” she said, regaining her normal disposition. However, as she finished the sentence, she let out a small yawn. Even though she had slept so soundly when they were in the same bed in Ogaki... Perhaps she took more notice of him as a man now, or possibly she was just still tired from the filming in Kyoto... Sakuta decided to be optimistic and stick with the former.

“Don’t go thinking cheeky things when you’re just *you*.”

“Oh, what gave me away?”

“It’s written all over your face.”

“What, that I think my innocent Mai-san is just too cute?”

“You really are cheeky,” she said, smacking him loudly on the forehead. “I made breakfast, so go wash your face.”

Sakuta raised his head off the floor to see French toast and scrambled egg laid out on the table.

“I’m sorry for using your ingredients without asking though.”

“Please think of this as your own house and do what you want,” he said.

“Hup!” Sakuta let out, looking like he was about to get up but actually just lifting his head onto Mai’s thighs into something that would usually be called a lap pillow. However, it wasn’t perfect, Mai was kneeling so Sakuta was oddly bent with his torso off the ground.

“Mai-san, my neck hurts.”

“Don’t do something and then complain about it,” she scolded. But even so, she made no attempt to move his head and the time passed blissfully.



“Huh!?” They heard out of nowhere from a little distance away, as Kaede exited her room.

“Ah, morning Kae-Ah!”

In the middle of his greeting, Mai suddenly stood, so Sakuta’s head lost its support and smacked into the living room floor.

He couldn’t even cry out in surprise, and just writhed on the floor, holding the back of his head.

“Morning, Kaede-chan,” said Mai with an unruffled expression, ignoring her boyfriend’s awful fate. Sakuta decided he probably

*had*

accidentally called out Shouko’s name in his sleep. Mai hadn’t explicitly said so, but that was her pride as his girlfriend, she didn’t want to admit to being bothered by Shouko.

“G-good morning. I didn’t see anything!” She cried as Sakuta finally got up to see her fidgeting with both hands covering his eyes, “I still can’t see anything, everything is dark!”

“Well yeah, it will be if you cover your face.” Sakuta retorted.

“I can’t see tomorrow either!”

“That’s just life.”

“It’s like a drama without a plot, isn’t it?”

“Mornings sure are lively in your house, Azusagawa,” said Rio as she left the bathroom, a strangely troubled expression behind her glasses. He was sure it was because she didn’t know how to fit in with the atmosphere here.

The four of them then surrounded the breakfast that Mai had prepared.

They began eating with a, “Let’s eat.”

It was the first time the dining table had been filled like this since Sakuta and Kaede had started living here.

It took a little while for them to all seat themselves, but Kaede and Sakuta sat next to each other and started ferrying the soft French toast to their mouths. It was strangely too perfect, so it was a little hard to eat.

“Onii-chan, this is tasty, it’s so fluffy!” Kaede exclaimed.

“The eggs are good too,” Sakuta told her.

“They’re melting in my mouth.”

“Let’s have Mai-san cook for us every day from now on.”

“Let’s!” Kaede nodded with a smile.

“Don’t exploit Kaede-chan,” Mai warned him, stepping on his foot under the table.

“Ah!”

“What’s wrong, Onii-chan?”

“My love’s being tested,” he said as Mai ground her foot on his.

Kaede tilted her head in question, and Rio stopped eating for some reason as well.

“Futaba-san, do you not like it?”

“Ah, that’s not it,” said Rio at Mai’s question, moving some of the French toast to her mouth, “It’s just been a while since I’ve eaten breakfast with someone.”

Now that she mentioned it, Sakuta realised she often ate toast in the lab and drank the physics teacher’s personal jar of instant coffee... Perhaps she didn’t eat breakfast with her family.

Just as he opened his mouth to ask, a quiet vibration broke through the air. It was a faint sound that you had to listen closely for, but Sakuta could immediately tell that it was a mobile ringing, as Kaede began to shake next to him.

“Ah, sorry, that’s me,” said Mai, bringing the bunny-covered phone out of the apron pocket, “Give me a minute, it’s my manager.”

She excused herself from the table and went out onto the balcony, putting

the phone to her ear.

“Hello?” She answered with an adult tone.

“Ah, Mai-san?”

Sakuta wasn't sure whether it was because the other person was speaking loudly or because the phone's volume was high, but the voice reached him as well.

“What's wrong?” Asked Mai.

“I'm sorry to bother you so early, are you free to talk?”

“I am.”

“Good work on the filming... Are you out by any chance?” They asked, probably hearing the sounds picked up by the mic. Well, strictly speaking, she was on the balcony.

“I'm at my boyfriend's house,” Mai replied easily, as if her manager should already know she was dating.

Or so Sakuta thought.

“Ahh, your boyfriend's... what!?” Came the managers yell of surprise. Apparently, this was the first they'd heard. “T-that was a b-boy!? You said boyfriend?”

“I did,” she replied unconcernedly to her flustered manager.

“D-don't move from there, please! I'll talk to the boss! I'll visit your home later!”

Apparently having hung up, Mai came back inside, even saying, “Now we're fine,” as she removed the phone's battery.

“I'm sorry, Kaede-chan,” she apologised gravely to Kaede as she sat back down.

“I-it's okay! I just shiver when I hear that sound.”

“Are you okay, Mai-san?” Sakuta asked.

“Thanks to you, I'm going to get a lecture from the agency's boss later.”



Sakuta remained silent.

“That was a joke,” she smiled like nothing had happened, moving some of the French toast to her mouth. “This is pretty good,” she praised herself. It actually was very tasty, and Sakuta wasn’t joking when he said he wanted her to make it every day.

“I can’t tell whether your showbiz jokes are jokes or not, so please don’t.”

“Having a boyfriend is fine.”

“What about your manager then? They seemed pretty panicked?”

“We just got an advertisement contract, so she’s sensitive to anything that could become a scandal. Well, we’ll probably just be told not to go out together for a while.”

“That’s not okay at all, is it?”

That just sounded like it would develop into telling them to break up.

“Ah, and as far as her being panicked, she always is.”

“That’s not okay either, is it?”

He didn’t know much about it, but a manager should be dealing with talent work and organising schedules. If they had a disposition like earlier, that would be a worry. And in the end, she had hung up even though she hadn’t brought up what she phoned for... And now Mai had removed the phone’s battery out of consideration for Kaede, so if she realised that she hadn’t told Mai what she was supposed to, she’d probably panic again.

Well, Sakuta worrying about it wouldn’t help, so he just decided to keep eating the delicious breakfast.

When the clock struck ten, Shouko visited as always. She was wearing a wide-brimmed hat today, looking like the daughter of some well-off family out for a summer walk.

“Mother said that I should wear it because the sun’s strong,” she excused as she noticed Sakuta’s gaze. “Um, do you have guests over?” She asked, spotting the unfamiliar shoes in the hall.

“A few things happened, you’re fine to come in though.”

Shouko shed her shoes and moved through to the living room to see Mai and Rio there as well as Kaede.

“You have a lot of female acquaintances, Sakuta-san,” she said.

Sakuta just looked at her.

“Ah, I didn’t mean anything bad by that,” she said, waving her hand in front of her chest to try and dispel the misunderstanding.

“I didn’t,” she repeated, even though Sakuta had said nothing.

“Do you think I’m some player?”

“No, I just think you’re surprisingly like one of the maharajas maybe,” she said carefully. Before the misunderstandings could develop further, Sakuta introduced her to Rio, her and Mai having met when they picked up the cat.

“This is Futaba Rio, she’s in my year at school.”

“I’m Makinohara Shouko,” Shouko said with a neat bow, prompting a slightly tense expression from Rio. After that, she glanced at Sakuta. He gave a slight nod. Yesterday he had talked with the other Rio, but hadn’t mentioned Shouko to this Rio yet, so it was only natural that she was surprised.

He’d talked with ‘Rio’, so even though he’d meant to have already spoken to her, he’d completely forgotten.

While Shouko was playing with Hayate, Sakuta spoke to Rio about her.

“Adolescence Syndrome really does love you, doesn’t it?” She said, not at all happily.

Later on, as promised, Sakuta and Shouko bathed Nasuno. Shouko held her up and took her to the bath. Hayate seemed to prance after them too, but was perhaps wary, as he didn’t follow them into the bathroom.

Sakuta filled the basin with warm water, and at his signal, Shouko put Nasuno into it. She sat obediently in the basin, and they used a jug to pour water over the part of her back that was out of the water as she closed her eyes in pleasure.

They then added shampoo.

“Go slowly with the direction of her fur.”

“Right.”

Shouko scrubbed Nasuno with her small hands, getting every nook and cranny and putting bubbles all over the cat’s body.

“Right, done.”

Nasuno exited the basin with an answering mewl, padding out right in front of Shouko.

“Ah, crap,” said Sakuta.

“Eh?” Questioned Shouko.

At nearly the same time, Nasuno shook the water off her body, spraying water everywhere.

“Kyaa!” Shouko screamed, falling back on the wet floor in surprise. Pointing the shower head at herself at the same time, “Kyaa, kyaaa!”

Shouko dropped the shower head in surprise at being soaked, the water making it write all over the floor, mercilessly soaking Shouko’s entire body.

She let out a whine as Sakuta hurriedly turned the shower off.

It was too later though. Shouko was soaked from head to toe, her thin white dress clinging to her skin, showing not just her underwear, but her skin as well.

Nasuno passed by her with no concern, leaving into the corridor. She was still wet, so they couldn’t just leave her.

“Kaede! Nasuno’s on her way, dry her off!”

After he’d finished yelling to Kaede, Sakuta offered Shouko a hand up. She was actually surprisingly light. He led her by the hand to the changing room and started to towel off her head.

“It’s okay, I’ll do it myself.”

“Fair enough,” he answered, she wasn’t a little child after all. “I’ll get you a change of clothes, so strip out of them. You don’t want to catch a cold.

“Right.”

Shouko put her hands to the buttons on her chest, but because of how wet they were, she didn't seem to be able to unfasten them.

“Give them here,” Said Sakuta, holding his hand out. Shouko obediently turned the buttons over. They were certainly tough, but he managed to undo the first, and then the second.

The dress' front was open and the white camisole she was wearing underneath was visible. That too was soaked through and transparent.

Just as he was about to undo another to make it easier to remove, he felt someone behind him.

“Sakuta, what are you doing?” Asked Mai from where she was standing in front of the room.

“Taking Makinohara-san's clothes off.”

“Don't just boldly admit it,” she said, apparently angry.

“Eh? Huh? Do I look like some pervert taking advantage of an innocent girl?”

“You do.”

“Wait a minute, Mai-san, she's still a child, right?”

Shouko was too young for Sakuta to think of her as a member of the other sex.

“She's a girl,” Mai continued, still displeased, apparently there was a difference in viewpoint between them. They definitely needed a clear delineation here.

“Makinohara-san,” he said.

“Yes?” She answered, calmly even as the conversation suddenly swung back to her.

“Do you bathe with your father?”

“I did until my third year,” she answered.

“What about now?”

“Not anymore,” she answered plainly.

Now that she mentioned it, even though she was younger, Shouko was already in her first year of middle school, and not a small child, she was a girl, like Mai had said...

“Umm... Mai-san, please deal with the rest,” he tried to misdirect her with a forced smile.

“When I’m done, we need to talk,” she said, unfortunately not misdirected at all.

“I hope it’s something fun.”

“Um, I’m okay with it, so please don’t be angry with Sakuta-san,” said Shouko, her pure gaze focused on Mai.

He was thankful for the help, but in this situation, it accomplished the exact opposite.

“Haven’t you tamed her well,” she said, her eyes unsmiling.

“I didn’t do anything, she’s always been like this.”

“Just get out already,” she said, ousting him from the room and closing the door firmly.

“Crap, she’s seriously mad...”

“I can hear you, idiot.”

“...I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

## 2

After a reaming from Mai and eating his lunch, Sakuta changed into his school uniform and headed towards school as he had planned. About a ten-minute walk under the scorching sun saw him to the nearby Fujisawa Station. It was in the centre of the town with a population of about 400,000. General stores and volume retailers practically surrounded the station, and the station itself was a meeting point between three lines, the JR, Odakyu, and Enoden lines, so had a lot of commuters even today.

A leisurely ride south-east on the Kamakura-bound Enoden took about fifteen minutes before he alighted at Shichirigahama station, a small station with just a single track going through it.

Sakuta exited through the ticket barriers and was greeted by the smell of the sea. He'd thought he'd get used to it with always catching the train, but the instant he stepped out of the carriage, he could feel the sea even now. If anything, his awareness had actually grown to the point where he could spot the subtle differences that came with the season and weather changing.

However, on this occasion, he couldn't help but be conscious of his legs as Mai had made him kneel for a long time, making them feel funny.

There were no other students on the short road in to school, He saw the odd local surfer carrying their boards which really brought the summer home. University students headed towards the sea, laughing as they went.

He passed through the gate, roughly a third open, into the school. He could hear the shouts of club activities from the sports ground, the baseballers rushing after their ball. Occasionally, the pleasant clang of a metal bat hitting the ball also sounded through the air.

With the summer tournament over, the third years had retired, so the team should be reorganising themselves into a new system. Only a few of the many players across the high schools in Kanagawa would have the opportunity to step out onto the field at Koshien Stadium. The Minegahara students this year had encountered the reigning champions in the second round and been soundly defeated. Precisely because the summit was so distant, it was rather dazzling to see those students working themselves to the bone for a chance to reach it.

Listening to their yells, Sakuta headed away from them towards the school building in search of some shade.

"Futaba, you here?" Sakuta called lightly as he opened the door to the physics lab.

There was no reply, and the room was empty. However, there was a half-drunk cup of coffee in the lab sink, so it seemed the 'fake' had indeed come to school.

Maybe she'd gone to the toilet he thought, sticking his head into the corridor and glancing at the girl's toilet down the hall. No one seemed to be coming out.

Her bag was under the desk, so she didn't appear to have gone home.

Sakuta wandered the lab, intending on waiting for Rio to return. The room was about as big as two normal classrooms, far too big to spend your time in alone. He could feel the traces of people having been here from the haphazardly placed chairs, and the distant yells from students going about their club activities made the silence in the room even more conspicuous.

Being here made it feel like he had been left alone within the school. Even though mere moments ago there were so many people, there weren't anymore... or so the atmosphere in the lab seemed to say.

That feeling grew into an uneasiness, a building pressure around his stomach, He wondered if Rio felt like this every day, or if it was just his imagination.

To try and change the mood, Sakuta opened a window, letting in a warm breeze along with the cheers from outside. Putting his head out of the window allowed the enthusiasm from the crowd around the gym to reach him. Many students in basketball uniforms were around the building, with some in a different colour, maybe from a different school.

"Oh yeah, Kunimi said he had a practice match," Sakuta said to himself, repeating what Yuuma had told him the day before during work, that they apparently had a match with a nearby high school.

In that case, Rio's location went without saying.

Going back to the entrance, Sakuta switched to his outdoor shoes and headed over to the gym, the noises of the ball bouncing, the players' yells and the squeal of their shoes on the floor becoming clearer as he approached.

The three equally-spaced doors were open to let the breeze in, and Sakuta saw Rio at the furthest one.

"So she is here..." he muttered, his voice slightly nervous.

He had met the 'fake' yesterday, and spoken to her properly, taking her advice. At the time he hadn't felt anything, but now knowing there were two

Rios and laying eyes on the other one made a chill run down his spine.

He watched her steadily. She had her hair up in the same way as she had when they met at the bookstore the day before. She wasn't wearing her lab coat, and her legs, usually hidden by its long hem, were completely on display, letting her slightly plump thighs be seen. Her blouse seemed tight across her chest, and the vest on top of it pushed it up into a curve. Her collar was properly done up, and coupled with her serious looks, made the growth of her chest draw even more attention.

Some of the boys from the other school were stealing glances at her, and as he passed them, he heard:

"Huh, is she a third-year?"

"She's kinda hot, smart-hot."

"Go talk to her."

*"You do it."*

He could understand their feelings as their pointless conversation unfolded. Rio certainly did look more adult with her hair up like that, and she looked sexy too. On top of that, her gaze without her glasses hiding it seemed rather listless and made you want to go talk to her.

However, Rio only had eyes for one person, and was following them. Rio wasn't watching the match, she was watching Kunimi Yuuma, her eyes not following the ball at all.





“Kunimi doing well?” Asked Sakuta, drawing alongside her, speaking as if everything was normal.

She started in surprise.

“Huh, her boyfriend?” Came one of the voices from earlier.

“I don’t think so,” was the reply.

Rio glanced at Sakuta and immediately looked away. Looking at her face from the side, she looked rather uncomfortable, and like she wasn’t enjoying herself.

“I just came to watch while doing club work,” she said faintly.

“I didn’t say anything though?”

“You’d have asked anyway.”

“Well, yeah, seeing you embarrassed is a precious sight.”

“Die.”

“There’s still lots I want to do with Mai-san, so wait eighty years.”

“You think you’ll still be alive at ninety-five?”

“People like me have long lives, right?”

“That’s not a line you’re supposed to come out with yourself,” said Rio with a sigh, her eyes following Yuuma.

Sakuta checked the score. The match was close, Minegahara had a slim lead of a mere three points. Basketball had three-pointers, so that could change in an instant. At that very moment, one of the yellow-shirted opponents took one of those shots.

The ball traced out an arc in the air... before bouncing off the rim. A tall, white-clad player scooped up the ball and flung it in a long pass to Yuuma, who was already near the other side’s net.

The hurried footsteps of both teams running off filled the gym.

Yuuma received the pass and immediately dribbled it through the other half, feinting passing it between the yellow player’s legs and leaving him behind,

arriving in the now free space and going to jump to take a shot. Suddenly, a huge player leapt in front of him, he was nearly two metres tall. However, Yuuma's motion was another feint, and his feet were still firmly planted on the ground.

Now that the defence was fully committed, he re-aimed and shot for real this time.

The basketball drew out a lazy parabola through the air, spinning beautifully through the net. The girls that had come to watch the match cheered shrilly, they were probably first years. There were girls from the other school cheering too.

"The hell, this scene just pisses me off, I'm 'censed."

"You're too narrow-minded, Azusagawa."

"Aren't you going to squeal 'kyaa, Kunimiiii' as well?"

She just glared at him.

"You'll surprise him and definitely get him."

"I *am* supporting him."

"On the inside?"

Her silence was confirmation enough.

"You're not appealing to him enough," said Sakuta as another cheer went up as the opponents scored. The reaction let him know that the match had been a back and forth like this, a close match. There were three minutes left in the match.

"Say, Futaba," Sakuta started.

"I'd rather you didn't interfere."

"What do you like about him?"

The ball was thrown right into the middle of the court.

"You're his friend and you don't even know that?"

"He's a good guy, nice enough that it pisses me off, and doesn't judge people

based off preconceptions.”

He could see things for himself, not based off rumours or hearsay from other people. Yuuma had said that it was how he was taught by his mother, but Sakuta didn't think that was something you could teach. The way of the world was that if you were with people who had bad reputations, your own reputation would suffer, so it wasn't like he couldn't understand Kamisato Saki's feelings when she told him to stay away from Yuuma. It wasn't pleasant to be told that, but...

“What makes you like him though? I'm a guy, so I don't get how someone like him charms girls.”

Sakuta knew that Yuuma had a good-looking face, and was taller than him. He was good at basketball and handsome in general. He'd heard female university students saying that he looked oddly childish and cute when he laughed. However, he had a feeling that none of that was the reason for Rio's feelings towards him.

“And what will you do when you know?” She asked.

“Nothing really, I'm just curious. It's the kind of conversation high school students have, right?”

“That's the right of normal high school students.”

“Are you trying to say you're special, Futaba?”

“I'm saying that I don't have a normal high school life,” she said, unimpressed, her eyes still following Yuuma alone.

“Everyone has the right to love, it's not like a car, you don't need a licence.”

Everyone was allowed to love. If anything, it was beyond being allowed or not. The heart moved as it willed, left or right. There just needed to be someone you enjoyed yourself with, that you worried about, that your worries felt like they'd crush your chest...

It was nothing special.

“I've thought this before as well, but you really are a romantic at heart.”

“I am?”

“You came all the way here to chase after your first love, and it took you a whole year to forget her, then you’re dating that celebrity, it’s not normal.”

“I’ll start to blush if you compliment me like that.”

“This should go without saying, but I’m not.”

“What a shame.”

“I’m not complimenting you, but I am a little jealous of your loyalty to your feelings. People normally pull back, honesty, straightforwardness and loyalty aren’t popular nowadays.”

Even as Rio said she was jealous, her demeanour remained unconcerned, and she didn’t seem it at all.

“You don’t care about fashions either.”

“If I went at it straightforwardly, it would ruin what we have now.”

Of course, Rio was talking about Yuuma.

“So? What made you fall for him in the end?” Asked Sakuta, forcefully returning the conversation back on track as he felt her start to skillfully change the topic.

Rio just glared at him before giving a blunt sigh, her eyes telling him to read the atmosphere.

“Huh, sighing at a love story.”

“Hearing the words ‘love story’ from your mouth gives me chills.”

“Then I’ll be careful not to say it a second time,” Sakuta allowed.

Somehow, he had the feeling that this was the first time in his life he’d said it.

“A chocolate cornet,” Rio suddenly muttered.

“Want me to run and buy one?”

“No, Kunimi gave me one when I didn’t have my lunch one day.”

The school didn’t have a wonderful cafeteria, so bringing packed lunches was the standard. If you didn’t have one, then there was a small van that came and was used by an older woman to sell bread, a bakery open just outside the gate

during lunch time.

There was also a convenience store near to the school, so if you decided to use it, you could. However, it was against the school rules to leave the grounds, so the number of people who did was limited.

So with the only rule-abiding way to get lunch being the bakery, it was naturally always packed, thronged by hungry students that descended like a plague of locusts, emptying the cases of bread.

Once they dispersed, the only things left were empty plastic cases, and a satisfied woman.

“It was in the first term of first year... it was the first time I’d gone to the bread van...”

The students surrounding the van could certainly be overpowering, and weaker hearted students probably couldn’t find the courage to plunge in.

“And then Kunimi appeared in shining armour?”

“He appeared eating his spoils, a curry bread.”

“The Curry Bread Prince, huh?”

“He spoke to me when I was overwhelmed... he smiled and said, ‘You’re a girl, Futaba, so I figured you’d want something sweet’.”

Even not having witnessed it himself, Sakuta could picture the scene. Rio would have been standing a little way away from the crowd, wanting to buy food but not having the courage to join the throng. Then, just as she gave up and headed off sadly, Yuuma would have appeared, wearing his usual carefree smile...

He could understand how that was the impetus.

Sakuta nodded with a “Hmm,” and awaited her continuation.

However, Rio just stood there and slowly flushed slightly red.

“And then?” He urged, once it became clear she wouldn’t continue.

“That’s it,” said Rio as usual.

“I see, that was it.”

“Right.”

“How much is a chocolate cornet?”

“Two hundred and thirty yen.”

“You’re cheap, huh?”

“If it was you then I wouldn’t have fallen in love.”

“So it’s his looks in the end.”

“Kunimi was the first one other than you to call me ‘Futaba’.”

Sakuta, Yuuma, and Rio had all been in the same class the previous year, class 1-1. Rio stood out because she always wore the lab coat, and didn’t join any of the girls’ groups. Of course, the boys didn’t talk to her either. The sight of her just sitting alone in her chair gave a strange impression, like she was unconcerned by anyone. Their classmates often called her ‘professor’ or ‘lab coat’ behind her back.

“Would falling for me be that bad?”

“I’m not your type anyway,” Rio said.

“Well, you’re the type I’d rather have as a friend rather than a girlfriend,” Sakuta answered.

Rio laughed at his unchanging personality as he spoke.

“In the end,” she continued, “I think it was the timing. | I was really down back then.”

“Hm? Did something happen back then?”

“Nothing really, I just felt depressed, I’m sure that’s never happened to you.”

“You might not be aware of this, so I’ll let you know, but I’m a human just like you.”

“That’s a shocking revelation,” she returned.

“Well, whatever. So? You thought Kunimi was special because he was kind to you when you were down?”

“...I certainly do sound cheap when you put it like that,” snorted Rio self-

deprecatingly.

As he was searching for an answer, the buzzer to signal the end of the match sounded.

“Thank you!” Came the thunderous yell through the gym.

After the match, the sweaty players came out of the gym in groups, whipping their tops off and yelling about diving into the sea before rushing over to the water supply and starting to wash themselves off. They were all toned from their exercises. The other school was apparently a seaside school too, as it wasn't just the Minegahara students that were tanned.

The first year girls were whining, half in shyness, and half in happiness. The girls from this school were mostly frowning and saying that boys were the worst, with this being something that only they could do after a match.

All that aside, Sakuta wasn't interested in men's bodies, so stopped watching, it was just sordid.

Rio did likewise, looking away. However, it was for a different reason than Sakuta. That the yells from Yuuma and the others as they messed around with the water reached her ears was clear from her reaction as she flushed right down her neck.

“Just watch if you want to watch,” Sakuta told her, as Yuuma shook the water off like a dog, before using a towel and drying himself then changing into a new T-shirt. “Ahh, he's dressed again.”

Rio turned ever so slightly to face him, the cold promise of death in her eyes. He should probably stop teasing her, he decided, lest he ruin their friendship.

“So? What did you want?”

“Huh?”

“You don't like school enough to come in during the holidays if there wasn't something you wanted.”

“Well, I wouldn't mind the holidays continuing forever,” if he could meet Mai every day that is.

“Your dreams are just like an elementary schooler's,” Rio cut him down, the



look in her eyes telling him to get back to the point.

“I’ll put it bluntly then.”

“Put *what* bluntly?”

“Futaba’s at my house right now.”

Rio’s gaze suddenly wavered.

“I see, so that’s why you were acting weirdly on the phone last night,” Rio muttered to herself.

“What on Earth’s happening?”

“Why don’t you ask the other me?”

“You admit that there’s more than one of you so easily.”

Her tone was business-like, as if she was talking about somebody else. That was just like the Rio that Sakuta knew though. Her reaction to talking about Yuuma was just the same as well. Unfortunately, he couldn’t see a single thing about her that wasn’t Rio, how could he call her a fake?

“What’s the other me’s opinion?” She asked.

“That if it’s possible, it’s through quantum teleportation or something.”

“The same as me then.”

Now that she mentioned it, when they met in the bookstore, Rio had bought a book on quantum teleportation.

“In that case though,” she continued, “there wouldn’t be more than one of me at the same time, and we’d have to have the same memories.”

The other Rio had said that as well.

“That’s why the other you said that it was your consciousnesses themselves observing you, split in two for some reason.”

He didn’t know whether the explanation was correct, but he understood it.

“I see, and the reason they split?”

“She said she didn’t have any idea.”

“And you believed that obvious lie?”

“I don’t suspect my friends of lying,” he said.

“You do, you actually think I’m a *fake*, don’t you?”

Rio stamped sharply on the ground.

“Honestly, I thought you might be at first.”

“That sounds like you don’t anymore.”

“No matter how I look at you, I can only see Futaba. Anyway, if you have any idea why your consciousness split into two, tell me.”

“Can’t you just ask the other me? She should have an idea.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because I do,” she answered.

In other words, she was trying to say that if the other was ‘Futaba Rio’, then she should know, and conversely, if she didn’t then she was the fake.

“If it’s the same whichever I ask, you can just tell me, right?”

Rio’s gaze slipped past Sakuta for a moment, to where Yuuma should be.

“I’m going back to the club,” she said, brooking no argument and walking off towards the building, nearly running in fact...

“You don’t want to talk to Kunimi?”

With trying to talk about Adolescence Syndrome being pointless, Sakuta called after her the same way as he normally would.”

All that she replied with was silence. She didn’t stop and continued on into the building, finally going out of sight.

“That restraint is just like her too,” said Sakuta, feeling the pain himself from watching.

“What’s up with Futaba?” Came the question from behind him, asked by Yuuma who had a towel on his head and was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. He had a blue-labelled sports drink in his hand, a two-litre bottle, already two thirds empty as he downed the last third all at once.

“Hahh, I’m alive again,” he sighed.

“So you were dead until now?”

“Near enough... So, what’s with Futaba?”

“Nothing really, Futaba’s being as Futaba as always.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

It was just a worthless distraction, but Yuuma decided to let it slide. Obviously, he couldn’t say about there being two Rios, Yuuma would think he was crazy. Actually, Yuuma would probably listen until he understood, but Rio probably didn’t want him to know.

“She was just here, right?” Asked Yuuma.

“You noticed?”

“I saw her watching from here right from the start of the match.”

“Focus more on the match itself.”

“Of course I can see my friends around the court,” he excused as he threw the now empty bottle into the rubbish bin. Sakuta thought hard at it, willing it to miss, but it went right in.

“You just thought ‘miss’, didn’t you?” Yuuma asked.

“You can read minds?”

“It was all over your face,” he replied, jabbing lightly at his head.

“Does Futaba often come?”

“Hmm, I don’t know, I guess sometimes while she’s here for club stuff?”

“I wonder which one she’s actually here for,” said Sakuta, looking meaningfully at Sakuta.

“You’ve been pretty forceful recently.”

“I just won’t let you play around with Futaba.”

“That’s putting it bluntly,” Yuuma said as the girls’ match began in the gym, “I’ll be careful with it... What’re you here for?” He asked as if it was the natural question.

“Should I not be?”

“You don’t like school enough to come in during the holidays.”

“Futaba already told me that.”

“...Is there something up with Futaba?” Yuuma suddenly asked after a moment’s thought.

“What do you mean, something?”

“There’s nothing really going on with me, and you’re here even though it’s the holidays... so I thought there’s got to be something up with her.”

The logic was based on whether Sakuta was at school... It was a conclusion that he never would have come to without knowing the two of them well.

“Kunimi-senpai, the coach wants to go over the match,” a first-year took advantage of the gap in their conversation.

“Got it, on my way,” said Yuuma, moving as if to go inside, but stopping and looking back at Sakuta first. “Call me if anything happens?”

“Hm?”

“With Futaba.”

“I’d have called whether you asked me to or not, you’d better come flying even if it’s the middle of the night.”

“I can’t fly myself, so I’ll just make my bike fly instead,” Yuuma answered with a smile, heading back inside.

### 3

Sakuta left the gym behind and headed straight for the visitor’s entrance, about thirty metres away from the main entrance. There was an office just inside, that wasn’t somewhere he went often, and wasn’t a place the students went in general. They normally used the infirmary, two doors down.

He took off his shoes in the quiet visitor’s entrance and changed into slippers. He didn’t go towards the unlit office, stopping instead in front of a green payphone. Taking a single ten yen coin from his wallet and lifted the handset,

just depositing that one coin.

He dialled his house phone, and it was soon picked up.

“Hello, this is Azusagawa.”

He could immediately tell that the person who answered was Mai.

“Mai-san, please say that one more time.”

“Hello, this is Azusagawa,” she repeated, sounding more like she was answering a business call this time rather than the gentle voice from earlier and he could practically see her tired expression.

“Try more like a newlywed.”

“You’re awfully excited over a phone call,” she said.

“Well, that’s because it’s a call with you.”

“I won’t act like a newlywed, even if you say that.”

“You don’t need to be embarrassed.”

“How are things there?” Mai returned to the main conversation, completely ignoring Sakuta’s needling.

He wanted to keep it going for a while longer, but ten yen had its limits, so he decided to answer honestly, after all, that was what he had called for.

He took out another ten yen.

“Futaba came to school,” he told her.

“I see. She’s been here for the whole time too.”

“What’s she been doing since I left?”

“Mainly watching Kaede study. She’s teaching science now.”

“To Kaede?”

“Well, there’s a bit of distance between them,” she said, letting out a tiny laugh. Kaede was probably peaking out of her room and Rio was teaching her from the living room. Kaede was bigger than Rio, so it certainly did give a rather amusing impression. Kaede was 162 centimetres tall, and Rio was only about 155, so he could understand Mai’s laughter.

“And what have you been doing?”

“I cleaned your room,” she answered, purposefully adding some mischievousness to her tone.

“So, Mai-san, you opened my wardrobe and looked at my boxers.”

“I disposed of all the illicit things within your room.”

“...Seriously?”

“You don’t need the bunny suit anymore, right?”

“That’s my second most precious thing!” He leaned in closer to the handset.

“What’s the most precious then?”

“You, of course.”

“Right, right.”

“I was being serious,” he said.

“Then you don’t need the second onwards.”

“Eh?”

“If you have me, that’s enough, right?”

He had no answer.

“Am I wrong?” Came her sharp question.

“It’s enough,” he answered quietly, with nothing else to say.

“You don’t need to be so upset about it. I put it all aside rather than throw it away.”

“You’re mean, Mai-san.”

“Oh yeah, do you like idols?” Asked Mai, suddenly changing the topic. It was too sudden, so Sakuta didn’t know what she was getting at.

“Eh? Why do you ask?”

“There was a manga magazine with an idol gravure shot on the cover, from about three months ago.”

“Ah, I just forgot to throw it away, you can get rid of it.”

“I see,” Mai agreed shortly. Her reply sounded like she was thinking of something else though.

“Mai-san?”

“Oh yes, my manager is coming in about ten minutes, is it alright if I let her in? Um... I should keep my eye on Futaba-san after all, right?” She asked, speaking more quietly out of concern for Rio.

“If you say that greeting again.”

“Hello, this is Azusagawa,” she said softly, giving an aura of happiness to the words, just as a newlywed like Sakuta had imagined. “Sakuta, do you want to marry me?”

“Right now, I want to be your boyfriend,” he answered.

“I didn’t want you to just answer ‘yes’ right away, but that seems oddly like a refusal.”

“Honestly, marriage doesn’t really feel real to me yet.”

“Hmm,” she said, still not fully convinced it seemed, “Well, I agree with that, a happy family scene doesn’t really have any reality to it.”

Mai was almost speaking to herself, Sakuta thought because her parents had split up when she was young and she had lived with her mother for a long time, and now she had a poor relationship with her mother and lived apart from her.

“Actually, I do want to get married,” Sakuta said.

“What brought this on so suddenly?”

“I want to have a happy family with you.”

“Right right, so? Are you coming home now?”

“That’s the plan, I have something to ask that Futaba.”

“I see. Well, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Right.”

Sakuta waited for the call to end and put the handset back and returned the remaining coin to his wallet before turning around to leave.

“Geh,” he couldn’t help but see when he saw someone standing behind him. Yuuma’s girlfriend, Kamisato Saki, was standing four or five metres away.

“What’s ‘geh’ supposed to mean,” she asked, looking at him with her hands on her hips.

Their gazes locked for several seconds without them saying a word. Deciding that was a good thing, and because he didn’t have anything he needed to talk to her about, he immediately went to change back into his shoes.

“Hey,” she called sharply, her displeasure evident in her words.

Sakuta continued to just put on his shoes.

“Pretending you can’t hear me is seriously annoying,” she said coldly.

Sakuta gave a mental sigh and turned to face her.

“My bad, I just didn’t even dare dream that you, Kamisato Saki, seen as the cutest girl in our class would talk to me, the class loner. Uwah, I’m so surprised,” he answered in a dull monotone to convey his own mood.

“What’s with you, that’s seriously annoying,” she said, looking at him like he was trash. How humiliating. If he was going to be looked at like that, he’d prefer it to be by Mai, that would end up being a reward for him, but from Saki, it was just unpleasant.

“I’m well aware I’m being annoying,” he answered.

Of course he would be annoying if he was called annoying, but particularly the lack of denial about her being known as the cutest must have been pretty pleasant for her.

“What’d you want then?” He asked. “Here to ask me to break up with Kunimi again?”

“I’m the one dating him.”

“We’re actually fudge packers.”

Saki didn’t answer, but her cheeks reddened slightly.

“You’re interested in that, Kamisato?”

“I’m not!”



“Rest assured, I don’t either. I’ll pass on men, I like women. So much so that if I try and write ‘woman’, it ends up as ‘wow, man’.”

“What are you on about?”

“So, to avoid me getting even more troublesome, hurry up and get to the point.”

Mai was waiting for him at home, so he wanted to get back quickly.

Even though she had started the conversation, Saki hesitated slightly, looking around like she was searching for the words.

“Azusagawa, you’re friends with that woman, right?”

He remained silent.

“What?” She asked.

“By ‘that woman’, I assume you mean Futaba?”

“The lab coat woman.”

“So yeah, Futaba.”

Saki shut her mouth again, but this time her gaze immediately returned to his with her usual expression of confidence, the first expression he had seen from her.

“That woman’s doing some pretty risky stuff don’t you think?”

“Risky stuff?”

For a moment, he thought she was talking about Rio’s Adolescence Syndrome, but she had said ‘doing’, which didn’t fit with that, and it made him feel a little uneasy.

“What, is she making a bomb in the lab?” Asked Sakuta to prompt her, unable to derive what she meant on his own.

“Huh? Are you an idiot?” She looked at him, disgusted from the bottom of his heart.

“What then, just hurry up and tell me,” he prompted, keeping a hold on his anger.

“She...” Once again, Saki stopped speaking. This was the first time he had seen her so inarticulate and just as it was starting to grate on him, Saki said something unthinkable. “About a week ago... she took a picture of what’s under her skirt.”

It took a moment for him to understand what she’d said.

Silence fell between the two of them and they could faintly hear the calls from the gym.

“Huh?” Sakuta finally managed after about five seconds.

“I’m telling you! She took her phone camera, and...” Saki slipped her own phone under her skirt and crossed her legs, taking some strange pose that managed to hide her underwear.

“I guess some perverted games are popular with schoolgirls at the moment.”

“They’re not.”

“Kamisato, are you turned on?”

“I’m not!”

“Keep things in moderation.”

“Like I said, it’s not me! It’s that woman Futaba! You’re really annoying, just die.”

The last sentence was said in a cold tone, all-together seriously. Sakuta realised he’d pushed her too far and apologised mentally.

“...Futaba is?”

However, he couldn’t believe what Saki had said.

“She is,” nodded Saki at his question to himself.

“Is he.”

“Yes.”

“Isss sheee?”

She didn’t reply further and they just looked at each other for several seconds.+

“...So, was that it?”

Sakuta was plenty surprised, and honestly more so at this than there being two Rios. However, he hadn't seen it himself, so it didn't feel really realistic, so he couldn't help but be less moved by it than Saki.

Besides, after Adolescence Syndrome, Sakuta was prepared to accept far more ridiculous things.

“You don't get it at all, do you, Azusagawa?”

“She took a selfie up her skirt? I get that.”

“Don't you think she might be showing it to someone?”

“Huh?”

“You really didn't,” she said, looking aghast at his perceived stupidity.

“I don't get what you mean by showing it to someone, ain't the foggiest.”

Saki averted her eyes at Sakuta's statement and started messing with her phone, her expression bored.

She then raised her face from her phone and approached him with long strides and that bored expression on her face. The breeze carried a citrus scent to his nose, probably Saki's perfume.

“Here,” she said, thrusting the screen in front of Sakuta's face.

It was someone's twitter account. The display picture was just a photo of her mouth down, so it was hard to tell who it was, but Sakuta had a single idea. The two small moles on the right side of her lips were in a rather similar place to Rio's.

The top post was ‘just a little’, and posted yesterday with a single photo. It was of her blouse with the top three buttons undone, and open somewhat sexily. The angle from above gave a brilliant view of her cleavage.

The photo was only a narrow shot, but it looked like a familiar school uniform.

“This is that woman's hidden account.”

“Hidden account?”

“An account kept secret from real life friends and acquaintances,” Saki told him tiredly.

“Hmm.”

Were these dozen-odd characters really that?

“That woman doesn’t seem to have a public account, so it could be either though.”

“So, why do you know about Futaba’s secret account?”

A hidden account would have no meaning if people that knew her in real life could find it. They weren’t friends, or even acquaintances, so they wouldn’t exchange accounts.

“I saw her phone when I went to the lab earlier,” Saki easily admitted to taking it upon herself to look.

“Seriously, what are you getting up to while your boyfriend’s playing his practice match...”

“This has nothing to do with Yuuma!” Saki overreacted, glaring at him.

“What, are you fighting?”

Saki remained silent and just glared murderously at him. Apparently, he was right, and something had happened in the intervening days since their beach date.

“Well whatever, Futaba’s been careless and you’ve been reckless,” Sakuta said. Thanks to that, Sakuta had come across some information he wouldn’t have otherwise, but... “Do you go through Kunimi’s phone like that too?”

Saki didn’t say anything and just kept glaring with the same scary expression as early. Maybe that was what had caused the fight. Best not to follow that rabbit hole any further, he thought, before the anger was directed his way.

“Can I look?” He asked.

With that, he took Saki’s phone and scrolled through the submissions.

He soon reached the end, there weren’t more than ten. The first one was a picture of her pyjamas, a fluffy, hooded set, with shorts for the bottoms, so her

legs were clearly visible with her soft thighs at the top. Her soft, arousing thighs. It had been posted with 'I'll post again if people like it'.

There were nine other similar posts, none of them with the face showing. The first post was dated the twentieth of July, a week prior.

On each of them were long threads of responses.

*These are good thighs!*

*Those PJs are cute, I want to wear ones like that!*

*A high schooler? With THAT cleavage!?*

*That 'I' shape shows these are natural, fake ones make a 'Y'...*

*Lol, here comes the tit-maestro.*

And so on... Many responses asking for more, and to see more.

"If that's really Futaba."

"I'm sure," Saki snapped in confirmation.

"Why's she doing it then?"

"To get more followers."

She currently had around two thousand.

"What does that do?"

"It doesn't do anything."

"The hell?"

"The sexy stuff is because she wants attention," Saki told him.

"I see," Sakuta agreed, still not really getting it, he couldn't see a reason for her to take the pictures, or to upload them. Thinking logically, it was a stupid action, that was all. But Rio herself would definitely know that, so if there was a reason she would so so despite that knowledge, it didn't come to mind.

"When do high school girls do this kind of thing?" He asked.

"I don't."

“Just tell me without the bluster.”

“I already said I don’t, are you an idiot?”

“Even though you take these photos?” He asked, showing her a photo he had opened up.

It was a selfie of Saki hugging a metre tall bear, a character with a fiendish ‘Gaburincho bear~’ expression.

“H-hey, don’t just go through my phone! What are you thinking!?”

“When you complain at people, it’s important to remember what you’ve done yourself.”

She snatched the phone back off of him.

“Geez, you can just ask her about the rest,” she said before stalking off in a huff.

“She has a strange way of worrying about people,” Sakuta muttered to himself as he watched her leave. She had a strange sense of justice.

“What now then...?”

Now that Saki had left, his thoughts turned back to Rio. She was now in the physics lab performing some experiment, so talking to her would be simple, but he had noticed something.

The account Saki had shown him had the first photo posted a week ago, and Rio had said yesterday that it had been three days since there was another Rio. In other words, a week ago, there should have only been the one... so Rio was taking erotic selfies and uploading them before her Adolescence Syndrome was an issue.

“Honestly, what do I do...”

He had the knowledge that there were high school girls that used their sex, that used it... or were used for it. The phrase JK Business was often on the news nowadays.

Sakuta used to treat that kind of thing as something happening in some far-off country, and wasn’t really aware of it. He hadn’t heard any rumours of any

of his classmates doing so, and had never been involved with anything like it himself.

“I need to talk to someone...” he said to himself, but couldn’t think of anyone that was knowledgeable about this kind of thing, “...Actually, there is someone.”

They weren’t someone he wanted to meet, and even less wanted to be indebted to her, but there was no one else he could talk to.

Sighing, he took his shoes off and returned to the payphone, taking out a business card from his wallet at the same time as the coins.

## 4

“Welcome!” Came the adorable voice of a waitress as Sakuta entered the restaurant he worked at, “Huh, senpai?”

Tomoe was the one greeting customers, the doubt on her face was probably because she knew that Sakuta didn’t have a shift that day.

“I’m a customer now,” he told her.

“Table for one?”

“I’m meeting someone, they’ll be here later.

“Sakurajima-senpai?” Tomoe asked hesitantly, with adorably upturned eyes.

“No.”

“Kunimi-senpai?”

“Not him either.”

She fell silent for a moment, apparently, she couldn’t think of anyone else he would be meeting.

“An imaginary friend?” She asked rudely.

“I’ll grope you,” he warned.

Immediately, Tomoe covered her backside.

“Wouldn’t you normally think I was talking about your chest?”

“You know I haven’t got enough chest to grope.”

“When did our relationship get so erotic?” He asked.

“I-I didn’t mean it like that!” Tomoe protested with a pout.

“Well, you’re really cute, Koga.”

“That’s enough, this way.”

That should have been a compliment, but Tomoe didn’t seem pleased and showed him to an inside booth while complaining under her breath. It was table number five, where Mai had been sitting yesterday.

Sakuta sat down obediently.

“Senpai, why are you in uniform?” Tomoe asked as he did.

“I went to school.”

“For remedial lessons?”

“I’m not you.”

“I don’t have any either.”

“Just some errands,” he told her.

“Hmm,” she noised, dissatisfied at him avoiding the question as she glared at him. She didn’t question him further though.

“Just access to the drinks bar,” Sakuta gave his order.

“Right, enjoy yourself,” she said with a smile and a polite bow after putting the order into the terminal.

It was then that the customer bell rang.

“Welcome!” She called as she trotted over to the entrance.

However, she soon returned to Sakuta’s table.

“U-umm, your guest,” offered Tomoe with a nervous expression, looking questioningly towards Sakuta. This was because of the ‘guest’ at her side.

She was a woman in her late twenties. She was wearing a cool-looking white blouse and an adult pair of trousers that went down to her calves. She had a



light coating of makeup that gave her an active impression, like that of a news reporter... that said, she was a real-life news reporter.

"I thought things had gone too far between us, but then you called me and asked me to meet," said Nanjou Fumika as she sat down opposite him with a smile.

"Stop talking like a wife counting down the days to her divorce."

"Oh, you got it," she said, apparently having actually been going for that set-up.

"Would you like anything to eat?" Tomoe asked, holding out a menu.

"Could I get a cheesecake and drinks bar set?" She asked without taking the offered menu, giving a smile to Tomoe.

"R-right, a cheesecake and drinks bar set."

Tomoe entered the order with jerky movements, looking at Sakuta as she did, but obviously couldn't ask what kind of relationship they had.

"Enjoy yourselves," she said as she left the table.

"She was cute," Said Fumika.

"Right?" Agreed Sakuta.

"What are you so proud of?"

"She's my wonderful kouhai," he told her.

As he spoke, Sakuta stood up and headed to the drinks bar, making two coffees, one hot and one iced.

When he got back, Fumika already had her cheesecake in front of her, and already having started to eat as the pointed end had been broken.

"Here," he said, placing the coffee cup in front of her.

"Thanks" she replied, immediately putting her glossy lips to the cup and blowing lightly over it.

"You wanted to ask about how high school girls live nowadays, right?" She asked.

She was currently focused on a lunchtime variety show as the assistant presenter. It was wide-ranging, covering entertainment, politics, and economics, among other things. They often touched on issues and society in general concerning minors, so Sakuta had gotten in contact with her, assuming that she would know about it.

“There’s been a lot with issues on online dating sites and compensated dating with the JK Business recently,” Fumika recited as she had on the phone. Then she had gone so far as to say that she was free now, and come to meet him. She then let her true aim out, “Ah, of course, I’d like to interview you at some point to make up for this.”

“I don’t get what you mean by that,” Sakuta said.

“You should know what I want even if you won’t say so.”

Even so, Sakuta maintained his carefully blank expression. Sakuta rather liked her frankness at times like this, and would probably like her if she didn’t want to report on him. However, that was exactly why he couldn’t let his guard down.

Fumika wanted to know about the Adolescence Syndrome that Sakuta had experienced. The abnormal incidents would never be accepted as the truth by society, and he’d be denounced as a braggart and maybe even hounded by cameras. There was the risk that that could involve Mai, Tomoe, and Rio right now.

“So, what exactly did you want to know about?” She asked, ferrying a bite-sized piece of cheesecake to her mouth.

“About girls taking pictures of their cleavage and putting them on social networks.”

“Is that voluntary? Or are they being coerced by someone on some dating site?”

“I think it’s voluntary.”

“So that’s it...?”

“What do you think?”

“I think that high school girls grow up quick nowadays.” Fumika’s gaze slipped past Sakuta. He turned to follow her look to see a group of four uniformed students crowded around a phone, laughing away, entirely in their own world. “Back when I was in high school, I didn’t have any cleavage no matter how much I tried.”

“I don’t really care about your development.”

The white blouse that she was wearing now couldn’t hide the large swell of her chest.

“And yet I can still feel your gaze right on my chest?”

“As far as the conversation goes, think of looking like a compliment.”

“It could be because men react like that,” she suggested.

She only continued when Sakuta’s silence made it clear he had no answer, “Because there’s a demand for it,” apparently she was now moving to the main topic, “when I feel your gaze on my chest, it gives me no small amount of satisfaction.”

“You harlot.”

“Being seen as a woman is important in its own way. Well, it depends on who by, I’ll pass on perverts and bosses using their position for that.”

“So they upload pictures like that for that satisfaction?”

“That’s one reason that their actions can escalate. First, it starts with their legs, a hint of underwear, then they get comments like ‘nice’, ‘show us more’, and ‘I want to see a swimsuit next’, and it all gradually escalates.”

Sakuta just looked wordlessly at her.

“You don’t look like you believe me, but girls that I’ve interviewed have all said it differently, but said something like ‘I wanted to think someone needed me’.” He really

*didn’t*

get it. “Sorry for putting this slightly out of order, but girls that do this tend to have a stronger sense of isolation than others.”

“Isolation...”

“They couldn’t make friends at school, or things didn’t go well... They don’t talk with their family much, or have a strong sense of expectation from them, and either way can’t come to a mutual sense of understanding... then they start to think no one understands them.”

“I see,” Sakuta said, mostly just nodding along, barely understanding anything.

“But because of that, they’re always looking for validation, and I think that as soon as anyone says something nice, they’re satisfied.”

“So because that makes them happy and satisfied, they think they need more and escalate, like you said earlier?”

“That’s right.”

“But what do they think of what they’re actually doing? Do they think it’s right, do they

*want*

to do it?” That was the question most on his mind.

“The second-year I interviewed said she always felt dirty doing it, like she was pathetic taking pictures of herself in her underwear and that she was embarrassed... Then when she uploaded them was worried about not getting any replies, or that even if she did they’d be things like ‘cow’, or ‘creep’.”

“Then surely they can just stop?”

Thinking that they shouldn’t have in the first place was probably too simplistic.

“That unease and worry is the problem,” said Fumika, before continuing when Sakuta frowned in thought, “The bigger that unease and worry gets, the bigger the happiness when they get positive responses.”

Sakuta nodded, understanding how that amplitude could make them happy.

“The simple word ‘nice’ gets rid of that discomfort and gives a huge sense of satisfaction it seems,” added Fumika.

“But isn’t that counterintuitive?”

“It is, it satisfies them temporarily... but their discomfort soon returns and they want more.”

“So it’s to bury that unease and loneliness...?”

“It creates a vicious cycle that’s hard to escape from. They don’t want anyone close to them to know, so they can’t talk to them. It starts as just giving into temptation slightly. I suppose that’s what it seems like... from the girls I’ve seen at least.”

He thought that he understood, but didn’t have any confidence that he actually *could*.

“How should you bring it up?” He asked.

“The worst option is saying things like ‘don’t do stupid things like that’. They know what they’re doing is stupid, and don’t think they can be forgiven for it.”

He could understand that at least. Memories of when Kaede was bullied passed through his mind. When she stopped going to school, people had told her ‘you’ve got no will-power’ and ‘get a hold of yourself’.

But Kaede wasn’t distancing herself from school because she liked to, she hadn’t become a home-loving girl like that.

Kaede had suffered not going to school and had tried to do better, but even now he thought that it might have just made her wounds worst.

What was necessary was to understand her feelings, and for people to praise her for the effort. She didn’t want to not go to school, she wanted to but couldn’t. She needed people that could understand that.

Sakuta had come to understand that from her wounds... and Shouko had finally explained it to him. Explained that he should give her happy words instead.

“Well, you probably already know that much,” she said.

Even so, he was grateful to have had it put into words, while he may have

somewhat understood it, it was important to ready yourself before you confronted that kind of situation.

“Not at all, thank you.”

“Seeing you come so meekly to me is a precious sight, am I close to getting you?”

“This and that are separate things.”

“Oh my, what a shame,” she said, not seeming particularly upset at all as she ate the last of her cheesecake. “Were you asking about a friend?”

“No comment.”

“How could you be so cold? Even after I told you all this.”

“It’s a friend, yes.”

Letting her make it seem like she was doing him a favour would get irritating, so Sakuta admitted it easily.

“Be careful then,” she told him.

“I intend to be.”

The question was actually what he could do.

“Once things are online, they’re rather difficult to remove. Once they’re there, stopping isn’t necessarily the end.”

That was also an issue, it wasn’t necessarily a lie that they would stay with you for your entire life when you did something like that.

“Even if they don’t show their face, there’s still the risk of being identified, being found, or being caught up in issues or crimes. Phones with GPS can include location information in photos depending on the settings.”

While it could be convenient, once that information was out there, it couldn’t be contained as it propagated at the speed of light.

“There are still pictures of my skirt getting blown up during a broadcast, it’s a real issue.”

“Aren’t you glad to be in demand?”

“I was wearing black underwear then, so I got awful calls like ‘You’re so shameless, wearing those on daytime TV’. I wanted it to be forgotten quickly, but I still sometimes see it on the internet when I’m researching.”

So would they have been fine if it was at night? Sakuta wondered. He didn’t get people that would go out of their way to call up and complain.

“Well, that’s enough about me,” Fumika said with a smile.

“What?” Sakuta pressed her to ask what she wanted.

“What kind of relationship do you have with Sakurajima Mai-san?”

“We’re schoolmates,” he answered dully, slaking his thirst with his iced coffee.

“Is that all?” She asked, clearly doubting it, with some basis as well.

Sakuta had allowed his scars to be photographed in exchange for information about Mai, and Mai had then negotiated to avoid it being published, offering the news of her own return to show business.

In essence, Mai had covered for him, so of course, Fumika thought there was something more than being schoolmates there. If anything, it would be stranger if she

*didn’t* think that.

“She hasn’t had any love scandals yet, so something like ‘She’s found a boyfriend’ would be a great scoop.”

“In that case, I would never answer that in an interview I think.”

“I think there are other companies aiming for that too, so take care. I can’t accept our relationship souring because of something like that.”

“I understand,” he answered. Though he didn’t know how realistic that was, Mai didn’t seem to be worried about it at all. During the last term, they had normally gone too and from school together and she had stayed at his house yesterday with great pleasure. Either she didn’t feel any sense of danger from doing so, or was doing it despite the knowledge. He should check with her when he got home.

“So?” Fumika asked, leaning forward conspiratorially.

“So what?”

“How far have you gone?” She asked girlishly, her eyes sparkling.

Sakuta couldn’t help but look aghast at her.

“Have you kissed?” She continued, unconcerned.

“Nanjou-san.”

“Well? Have you? Have you?”

“You sound like an old gossip.”

“You can tell me that much,” she sulked childishly, slumping back into her chair.

“Do you not have a boyfriend?” Sakuta returned bluntly.

“You know, listen to this, he’s awful...” She started, before complaining about her boyfriend for over an hour.

They had been dating since they were students and they were the same age. He worked at a major communications company and they had been living together for three years. Fumika seemed to be waiting for a proposal, but he didn’t seem to feel the same way. It seemed that compared to her work as a newscaster, he wasn’t quite there yet, so she told him about what he had said last night.

“So what happened in the end?” Asked Sakuta, having been swept up in her anger as well.

“He said that we should break up if I don’t like it. I could get a pro-baseballer, definitely.” She said, but it still seemed like she liked him.

In exchange for all of the information she had given him, Sakuta continued on through that conversation for the whole hour.

## 5

Sakuta was walking towards home alone after parting with Fumika at the



restaurant. The time was approaching seven PM, and though he couldn't see the sun itself, the sky was still plenty bright enough.

As he passed by a nearby park, he could hear cicada calls from the trees just inside. There was only the one calling, and from the call itself was probably a large brown cicada. There were many more around noon, enough of them to make a real racket, but the cry now seemed somewhat sad.

Sakuta stopped and looked up at the tree, but couldn't spot the actual insect.

"...Isolation, huh?" He muttered unconsciously. That was the word that had most concerned Sakuta from the earlier conversation, the word that had lodged itself in his chest. If what Fumika had told him was the case, then Rio would be being tormented by that isolation. "She doesn't really have the personality to fit in with any of the groups in class."

Rio's argumentative nature would definitely backfire in those communities that required empathy and sympathy. Rio herself probably knew that as well, and that might be why she always distanced herself from their classmates.

She only spoke with Sakuta and Yuuma, perhaps that wasn't enough. Or perhaps she was isolated outside of school as well.

"I wonder what things are like at her home," Sakuta wondered to himself, giving up on searching for the cicada and heading home again.

Sakuta had never visited her house, and didn't know what kind of home she lived in, whether it was a detached house, a flat, or something else. He didn't even know what her parents did for a living. All he knew was that she lived one station up the Odakyu Enoden line from Fujisawa Station, in Honkugenuma. It was a little late, but Sakuta only now realised that he knew surprisingly little about Rio's personal information. She didn't tend to speak about herself without prompting, and only answered questions with what was actually necessary, so there were rather few opportunities to learn about her in derailed conversations.

"Well, I can just ask her in the end," he said. After all, you couldn't change a situation by just watching from afar, so he would just need to involve himself even if it would make her think he was annoying.

These were the thoughts that occupied Sakuta's mind as he yawned into the sky.

"I'm back!" Called Sakuta as he opened the door.

There was no response though. Normally, Kaede would come pattering out to greet him, but even as he looked towards the living room, there was no sign of her.

"Maybe they're asleep," he said as he took off his shoes and headed inside and washing his hands before entering the living room.

As he had thought, Kaede was lying in front of the TV, napping with the two cats.

"Welcome back," came a voice from the kitchen, making Sakuta turn to look quizzically in that direction.

Rio was standing there with a flame under a pan, stirring the contents to avoid it burning.

"Futaba, what're you doing?"

"Making curry," she answered.

"Dressed like that?" He asked in turn, pointing out the lab coat she was wearing.

"The curry might splash," she defended.

"Is that even edible?"

Her appearance was like a scientific witch, an expressionless, logical witch, and she seemed like she might have even added some dubious chemicals.

"I followed the recipe to the letter, so it's fine."

Now that he looked, Sakuta could see an open recipe book next to the pan that he had bought when they first started living on their own to learn how to cook. He had barely opened it recently, so had forgotten where it even was.

"Oh yeah, where's Mai-san?" He asked. Kaede was still sleeping on the floor in front of the TV, but Mai was nowhere to be seen.

"She's reading a script in your room. She also said to tell you to go see her as

soon as you got back.”

“I’ll go get changed while I’m at it then,” Sakuta couldn’t calm down if he was at home in his uniform, it was uncomfortable, “I’m one of the ones that gets changed right away when they get home.”

“I didn’t want to know,” Rio retorted, not taking her eyes away from the curry.

Sakuta moved to his door and knocked, just in case.

“Mai-san, can I come in?” He asked.

There was no reply. He’d gone through the right motions, so even if she was changing when he entered, she shouldn’t be angry. While hoping for a happy coincidence along those lines, Sakuta opened the door.

He immediately saw her, she was lying on the bed, her legs about a shoulder’s width apart as her eyes scanned over the script in her hands.

She was wearing a hooded top and a pair of trousers that came to just past her knees. The calves of her legs, usually hidden by black tights, were visible.

Her expression was stern, and her piercing concentration mixed into the air of the room, giving it a strained atmosphere. It really didn’t feel like he should call out to her.

For the time being, he quietly entered and carefully shut the door before kneeling in the corner of his room and waiting, naturally sitting in deference to the tension she was creating.

The steady rise and fall of Mai’s chest showed that she was breathing, and the repeated blinks made it clear she wasn’t about to slip off to sleep. Sakuta decided to kill some time so he wouldn’t cause a nuisance. He looked around his room and saw that it was beautifully tidied away. She really had cleaned up for him, and even the three-month-old magazine he had just dumped on the floor was neatly put on the desk.

With nothing else to do, he stretched his hand out for it. Like Mai had said on the phone, there was an idol group adorning the cover, seven fifteen or sixteen-year-old girls with smiling faces. Looking more closely at their clothing, he could

feel the edge of something like a rock-band. Mixed with their nature as a group of idols, it ended up like a well-made Halloween costume, looking cute and stylish.

Flipping the magazine open, the first few pages were a gravure shoot of the girls, with introductions for each of them. Apparently, they were called 'Sweet Barrette', and they were introduced with 'Is this year their break!?' in big, shiny letters.

Suddenly, his eyes caught one of their profiles, under the heading of 'Favourite thing', beneath height and hometown, was 'Sakurajima Mai'.

Her name was Toyohama Nodoka, sixteen years old. Despite the other members all having black hair, she alone stood out with her blonde hair.

*Wouldn't you usually say something like 'strawberries' for that?*

Sakuta wondered. The other six had all written things like that.

Sakuta ended up reading their profiles unexpectedly closely and then closed the magazine and returned it to the desk.

Checking on Mai again, he saw her pretty lips moving, maybe she was reading along to the lines, he thought.

"...Mai-san?" He called quietly, tired of waiting.

Mai didn't shift at all.

"Does that mean I can play whatever sexual joke I want?"

"I *can*

hear you," she said, finally looking away from the script to Sakuta.

"Did I interrupt you?"

"If I didn't want to be interrupted, I wouldn't have read the script here, welcome home."

"It's good to see you again."

Mai closed the script and sat up, re-seating herself on the edge of the bed. Sakuta went to sit next to her.

“You sit on the floor,” she said, like she was pointing at a kennel.

Sakuta reluctantly sat down on the floor.

“Your manager came?”

If Mai wanted something with him, that was what came to mind, so Sakuta started the conversation.

“She did, but she’s left.”

“Did you talk?”

“We did, that’s why she came here.”

Well, of course. Judging from her slight displeasure, Sakuta could more or less imagine how it had gone.

“What did she say?”

“She didn’t say to break up, but that we shouldn’t meet alone for a while.”

That was more or less as expected.

“Can I ask for their reasoning?” Sakuta asked.

“I’ve only just started work again, and she wants to avoid a scandal. We only just got an advertisement contract, so we need to be conscious about the sponsors. If it came out that I had a boyfriend, the company’s image might be tainted by my own.”

“A sports drink seller’s stocks will drop just because you got a boyfriend... that’s amazing.”

Though he had a feeling that it wouldn’t affect the drink that much...

“I could understand if I was dating some handsome idol and she was getting complaints from their fans, or if there was an affair with some married actor, but... If just going out with my junior from school, especially one as plain looking as you gives me a bad image, then the world’s beyond saving.”

“Well, I agree with that.”

“Ryouko-san seems to be under the impression that I’m one of those idols she can forbid from dating.”

She glanced at the magazine on Sakuta's desk he had been reading earlier.

"Ryouko-san's your manager?"

"Yes, Hanawa Ryouko-san. She hates her surname since it got her the nickname 'Holstein' when she was a child."

Hanawa was said the same as the word for a nose-ring, and from there they went to Holstein cows. Sakuta was sure that the one that gave her the name was some moronic teenage boy, but he could appreciate the naming sense.

"Just so you know, Ryouko-san is slender," Mai told him.

"I didn't say a thing though?" Said Sakuta, keeping quiet that the nickname had made him picture someone with large breasts.

"She said she hates the sarcasm behind it too."

"How long?" Sakuta asked.

Mai's expression suddenly gained some scorn to it as she looked at him.

"I was asking about how long she'd been around," Sakuta defended, of course he wouldn't be asking about how long her bra straps were.

"She's been at the company for three years, and she's twenty-five."

"So, did you agree with twenty-five-year-old Hanawa-san's demands?"

"It's not something I can decide on my own, so I postponed it."

"You mean it's for us to decide?"

"Right, it's a problem for both of us, isn't it?"

That sounded nice, a problem for them both. Thought that said, there was only ever really one answer.

It was because Mai knew that that she was in a bad mood.

"I guess we'll have to for a while, won't we?" He asked.

That was the only real choice so Sakuta decided to say that to end the conversation.

"What do you mean by that 'have to'?" Asked Mai, her expression vanishing and her voice becoming toneless.

Mai had been angry at her manager earlier, but now Sakuta felt a lump in his throat.

She was being quiet, but was clearly furious.

“Huh? Why are you angry? Did I make you angry?”

Sakuta thought that if he took it completely seriously, it would turn into a real fight, so he exaggerated his fear.

When he did, Mai’s bearing changed and she glared purposefully at him.

“Don’t run away,” she said, it was scary, but also not, her anger having changed into something more playful.

“It’s a strategic retreat,” he insisted.

“You really are shameless.”

“You shouldn’t fight battles you can’t win.”

“You liar, you fight when you need to.”

“That makes me sound pretty cool actually.”

“Don’t say that about yourself,” she scolded, rolling up her script and whacking him over the head.

“Ow. If I start enjoying this kind of thing, I hope you’ll take responsibility.”

Mai just looked at him.

“I’m sorry, that was a joke,” he corrected himself.

“Are you okay with not being able to see me for a while?”

“If you think about it, we’ve barely been able to see each other recently anyway.”

“I’m impressed you can say that in this situation,” she said, glaring with narrowed eyes. It scared him, so he decided to go back to the main topic.

“I really don’t want to,” he admitted, “But, well, your manager’s right. You’ve only just started working again, so you should behave for a while and get your popularity back up, shouldn’t you?”

“That’s annoyingly logical,” she said, but she seemed to have wanted that

answer. She had probably known that it would end up like this from the beginning, but still chosen to go through the motions and bring it up as something they both had to decide.

Just as the conversation finished, the door slowly opened and Kaede peeked in from the crack, having woken up from her evening nap.

“Onii-chan, welcome back, are you finished talking with Mai-san?”

“I’m finished,” he answered.

“Then Rio-san said it’s currytime.”

“Not dinnertime?” He asked.

“Ah, it smells good,” said Mai. And she was right, the spicy scent filled the room.

The curry was cooked well and turned out nicely.

“Futaba, you’ll be a good wife someday,” Sakuta told her.

“Anyone can make curry like this,” she said, not at all embarrassed.

“The way you cook it makes it seem like an experiment though.”

The measuring spoons and scales, often unused by Sakuta, were on the work-surface. It was easy to imagine she had treated the ingredients like she would the reactants in an experiment and measured the spices out to the milligram.

Even though he hadn’t seen it, he was sure he was right. Coupled with the lab coat in place of an apron, it made the curry taste vaguely chemical.

Once the four of them finished dinner, Sakuta left with Mai to see her home. They rode the lift down to the ground floor and exited the building.

The sky watching over them was, of course, dark, the time being nearly half-eight. Even so, the nearly cloudless sky looked like a deep blue.

Mai only lived over the road, so it didn’t take even a minute to arrive. The two of them stopped a little before the auto-locking doors.

“Good night, Mai-san.”

“Yeah, night, Sakuta.”



“See you,” said Sakuta, raising his hand slightly before turning around.

“...Ah, wait,” Mai called quietly.

“Did you want a goodbye hug?” He asked, only to be answered with silence, “Huh? I was right?”

“No... but also yes,” said Mai, looking around carefully.

“Mai-san?”

“We won’t be able to see each other for a while.”

“We won’t,” he answered, not being able to just say ‘yes’ to that. But Mai had decided.

“Maybe not until the second term starts.”

“I’ll go and find some hidey-holes in the school then.”

“And you’re fine now?”

“Eh?”

“You’re fine parting like this?” She asked, tempting him with her upturned gaze, keeping her eyes on him even as she cast her head down slightly in embarrassment.

“Umm,” said Sakuta, looking away himself. Covertly checking the path to the station and the surrounding area.

“There aren’t any pedestrians,” Mai forestalled him, making his back stiffen.

“There aren’t any cars stopping either.”

If they didn’t have to worry about pedestrians, then there shouldn’t be any paparazzi around either.

He couldn’t back out after having said so much, of course he wouldn’t.

Sakuta gently placed his hands on Mai’s shoulders. Their gazes locked for several seconds and Sakuta moved his face towards Mai’s. Her eyes fluttered closed in a probably unconscious action. Mai hunched forwards slightly, tucking her head down. Gazing at her face himself, Sakuta took her lips.

“Ngh...” Came the slightly erotic noise from Mai’s nose, her hot breath

brushing against his cheek. It tickled oddly. Focused as he was on her lips, Sakuta forgot to breathe, and pulled away from Mai just as he began to feel the lack of oxygen.



Mai looked at Sakuta as if nothing had happened, but she couldn't hide the blush on her cheeks.

"D-don't you have anything to say?" She asked after several seconds.

"Thank you for the feast."

"Idiot," she said, sounding like she was trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Then, I want seconds."

"You really are an idiot," she said again, this time meaning it, her embarrassment fading into exasperation, what a waste, "We'll continue this later."

"Eh, but the fires are burning now, you can't ask me to hold it in."

"You're not a monkey in heat, so bear with it."

"You're the one that made me a monkey in heat."

"I don't need a monkey boyfriend."

"I was only answering your pleading."

"I-I wasn't pleading at all."

"Werrren't you?"

"I wasn't."

"You were really damn cute then though."

"You can't say that," Mai protested, "you'll get carried away."

Sakuta just stared into her eyes.

"Don't look at me like a dead fish either."

"It was supposed to be like an abandoned puppy."

"You have zero acting talent, actually, it's more like negative acting talent," she said harshly, "good night then."

Sakuta tried to wordlessly resist.

“Sakuta, I said goodnight,” she repeated as one would to a misbehaving child.

“Good night,” Sakuta replied flatly.

“I’ll call you.”

“Uwahh, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hahhh...” Mai let out an exaggerated sigh. A deep, deep sigh. “You’re only allowed to be selfish for today, okay?”

After saying that quickly, Mai took a step closer and stretched up, putting a gentle kiss on Sakuta’s lips, a short kiss with fleeting contact.

“This won’t happen next time,” she warned him.

“Eh? That’s the system?”

“It is,” Mai smiled happily at playing with Sakuta before twirling around and going inside, disappearing from his sight.

“Damn, I’m way too wound up now, what do I do...”

However, Sakuta couldn’t just spend the rest of the day in arousal, he still had things to do today, he had to go home and have an important conversation with Rio.

“I wonder if I can leave Futaba until tomorrow...” Deciding that he probably couldn’t, Sakuta retraced his steps back home.

## 6

When he got back from seeing Mai home, Kaede was in the bath and Rio was reading a hardcover book at the table, probably a novel.

The kitchen, which he had intended to tidy once he got back was already clean, the pots and pans put away and the leftovers boxed up and in the fridge.

“Thanks, Futaba.”

“Sure,” she replied shortly, focused on her book, “You took a fair while to see her home,” she added oddly meaningfully, but didn’t seem to be condemning him. She just sounded like she was stating a fact.

“What are you reading?” He asked.

“Your sister said it was good and lent it to me,” she answered, lifting the book to show him the cover. The title was

*The Naked Prince and the Unhappy Witch*

, and the author was Yuigahama Kanna, Kaede’s favourite author.

Sakuta had read many of her books at Kaede’s recommendation, but not gotten in to any of them. Most of them didn’t have endings he was happy with, they all left an unpleasant aftertaste. When he told Kaede, she said she hadn’t recommended those, but...

“Is it boring?”

“Hm? Not really... It’s about a girl that just got her first boyfriend and’s worrying about it.” Just hearing that he could tell the story was pleasant. “Her boyfriend is popular... so she worries that someone ‘plain like me’ isn’t good enough for him, and if a pretty girl comes near, she starts hating herself and thinking that they would be much happier together than he would with her. She’s still not honest though, so she takes that out on her boyfriend.”

That was a fairly specific description, and it sounded like the girl was rather irritating.

“Is it enjoyable?” Sakuta asked simply.

“It is, I can sympathise with her personality.”

“Is that *really* fun...?”

“Girls are creatures of sympathy and empathy,” she told him, seeming to be analysing it more than feeling it, even though she was a girl herself. If she was analysing herself so objectively, could she really be enjoying reading it?

“I’m done in the bath, I’m really warm,” came Kaede’s voice, prompting him to pass her a drink from the fridge. “I’m really chilly now!”

“Futaba, you can go ahead into the bath.”

Rio finally looked up from her book and directed a scornful gaze at him from behind her glasses.

“Just to make things clear, I have no intention to do anything with your bath broth.”

“Azusagawa.”

“You got it?”

“You needed to die the moment you said ‘broth’.”

“...I’m going to go ahead and take a bath then, you sure?”

“I’m sure, this is a good bit,” she answered, once more moving her eyes across the rows of characters.

“Is there a kiss scene?”

“She’s disciplining her boyfriend by looking at him like excrement on the floor.”

That sounded like an interesting scene slightly off from what he was expecting.

“Sounds fun, I’ll borrow it when you’re done,” he said, heading for the bath.

He showered after stripping, scrubbing his dominant arm with body-soap on a sponge, the same way as he always did, before using that arm to scrub the rest of his body. Once he was done, he rinsed the suds off and shampooed his hair, finally washing his face and cleaning everything off with the shower and then soaking in the bath, taking about ten seconds before leaving.

“Futaba, the bath’s free.”

“Did you use a birdbath?”

“The summer’s too warm,” he said. Of course, he would take longer during the winter.

“I’ll go use the bath then,” Rio said, putting a bookmark in between the pages and entering the dressing room, firmly shutting the door. However, the only doors in the house with locks were the front door and the toilet.

He could faintly hear the rustling of clothes beyond the door. Listening in would feel creepy, so Sakuta sat in front of the fan and switched it on, letting the wind cool his body.

*"Take me to your leader!"* He said into it, but it felt oddly pointless.

After about five minutes of cooling himself, he stood and headed towards the bathroom.

He opened the door into the changing room, hearing a clatter from the bathing area, the basin falling on the floor.

He could see a female silhouette through the frosted glass, with her back to him, apparently she had been in the middle of washing herself.

"Futaba, you got a minute?"

"Can I start?"

"Hm?"

"Why do you always talk to me when I'm bathing?"

"Because it arouses me to only have a door between me and a naked girl."

Only silence answered him.

"Probably because it's easier to talk about some things when you're not face to face."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She asked, guardedly. Even so, she began to move again, covering herself in bubbles.

Sakuta stayed away from the door and sat on the dressing room floor. He didn't think that their conversation would end quickly.

"What kind of house do you live in?"

"What are you asking for?" She asked doubtfully, but Sakuta paid her no mind and continued.

"A flat? A detached house?"

"A detached house."

"Is it big?"

"Are there ones that aren't?"

"Are you rich by any chance?"



“Maybe,” she answered easily, not really seeming like she was talking about herself. Sakuta had a feeling it was because she didn’t see herself as rich, but that it was her parents.

“What do your parents do?”

“My dad’s a doctor.”

“Seriously!?”

“It’s nothing to be surprised at, surely?” She asked.

“Is your house a hospital?”

“He’s not a GP, he works at a teaching hospital.”

“Is there a rivalry between the two types?”

“Apparently so.”

“That’s amazing.”

He could hear the water flowing and washing off the bubbles from the bathroom. After a few moments, Rio’s silhouette moved to soak in the bath.

“What about your mother?” He asked.

“She manages an import clothes shop.”

“So she’s the president.”

“She is... so, what did you want to ask?” Came her calm question, having noticed that Sakuta knew a secret about her, “You heard something from the *fake*, didn’t you?”

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that,” he never would have thought that Saki would have gotten involved, “I know what you’ve done.”

“I see,” she said emotionlessly, almost speaking to herself.

Silence fell for a while.

“I made the account before the summer holidays,” she admitted quietly, “but I didn’t know what I should write.”

She put it like it was some school exercise.

“Anything would have done, right? Something like ‘I’m in love with a hot guy that has a girlfriend’.”

“Would other people want to see that?”

“Aren’t girls creatures of sympathy and empathy?”

“Besides, they’d just think I was some bitter woman, and say that a hag shouldn’t get ahead of herself.”

“How humble,” he said. At the very least, he’d never once thought Rio was a hag or anything like that. She gave a plain impression, but that was one of her charming parts.

“I’m not insensitive enough to confess to a country-famous celebrity in front of the whole school.”

“You’re doing something even more daring.”

She gave no answer.

“You’ve never shown me your brilliant cleavage, even though we’ve known each other for more than a year.”

“I’ve got no reason to give you any service like that.”

“If it doesn’t matter who you show it to, shouldn’t I be fine too?”

“You really are an idiot.”

“Mai-san told me that too.” In pretty much the same way as well... “I don’t really get it, you’re usually so guarded.”

“...I really hate that you’re so perceptive.”

“Nope, you’re just easy to read,” Sakuta told her.

She wore her skirt longer than the other students, and always had her blouse completely done up. She even wore her lab coat in school during a time of the year when most of the girls didn’t even wear their vests. On top of having long sleeves, the long hem also hid most of her legs.

“And you still harass me even so.”

“I’m always careful to not really step over the line.”

“You’re awful.”

“Then you got tired of me and decided to try and make friends online?”

“I wonder... I think it’s a little different.”

“Different?”

“I think... I might have just wanted attention,” she said, mocking herself. She was acting the same way as she always did, she didn’t seem to have given in and was just speaking in her usual plain tone.

That actually made Sakuta more concerned though. It was clear that something had happened to make Rio upload the selfies, but that wasn’t the case. The gloomy days just piled up and things had ended up like this without anything dramatic happening.

He thought it had been like the glass of her heart being filled with resentment, drop by drop, before finally overflowing. Slowly, slowly encroaching on her, so Sakuta hadn’t noticed anything.

“Sexy stuff right from the get-go isn’t fair.”

“That’s all I have.”

“Oh, are you that confident with it?”

“...If anything, it’s more of a complex.”

If that hadn’t been the case, he wouldn’t have understood why she was so guarded.

“In middle school... I grew as a woman quicker than my classmates, so I got to know how the monkey-like boys looked at me.”

“Saying stuff like ‘man, her tits’?”

“They actually said exactly that.”

Sakuta himself knew about being monkey-like in middle school. Even now, he didn’t think that had really changed, they were at the age they were engrossed in female bodies, the age where even bra lines through the school blouse got them hot and bothered. If one or two girls had grown more, they’d be the focus of attention like that, and in Rio’s class, it seemed that it had been her.

“One day after school, I came back from taking the class’ rubbish for cleaning duty and heard the boys talking about me... then I hated my body, and thought I was dirty...”

It had left a long-lasting impression, either because she was sensitive, or just the shock of puberty itself. Even if it had just happened the once, it would stick in your heart and influence how you lived for a long time in the future, even if you didn’t realise that at the time...

“Sorry about that.”

“Why are you apologising?”

“As a representative for monkey-like boys.”

He heard a slightly tired laugh from the bathroom.

“Since then, I grew to hate the looks from boys.”

He got the particulars of what had happened until then, but it was inconsistent with what she was doing.

“But you still post those photos?”

That seemed completely counterintuitive. Rio hated the looks from boys, but even if she hid her face, she was still uploading risqué photos.

“They get reactions.”

“Do you want to be fawned over by creepy old men?”

“The only people that can choose are the ones with the charm to be able to, not everyone can get what they want.”

“I never asked you to give me the facts.”

“Just their reactions made me feel at ease, whoever they were from.”

“It certainly sounds like that’s not how you wanted it to be.”

“That might be why. In the end, I couldn’t let go of my hatred of being looked at... which meant that the method I was using was contrary to the goal, creating more stress. Then that made my consciousness diverge, it seems plausible at least,” she analysed herself calmly.

“Separating into the ‘Futaba that wanted attention’ and the ‘Futaba who couldn’t allow those methods’?”

He thought it sounded ridiculous, but it fitted together well, and Rio could well be right.

“I don’t think it’s that clear a distinction... but that fits the trend of the explanation.”

“I see...”

He looked up at the ceiling, to where the light was flickering. Unrelated thoughts filled his head for a moment, about how he should replace the bulb, but then about how expensive they were, but they soon vanished.

“The other Futaba is still uploading them.”

“I know. I checked in the net cafe. I was going to delete the account, but she’s already changed the password.”

“What will you do?”

“There’s nothing I can do,” she said resignedly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s me too, she won’t just stop easily, if she would she just wouldn’t have done it.”

“You didn’t say no one could stop her easily though.”

Rio remained silent.

“What do you want?”

“I want to stop her, if possible.”

“Got it, leave it to me.”

He hadn’t thought of a method, and he didn’t think she’d respond to his persuasion. Just like Rio had said, if she would stop easily, she wouldn’t have done so in the first place.

It wasn’t logical. If it could be stopped logically, then Rio would have been better to deal with the situation than Sakuta. However, it was because it wasn’t

that the situation had evolved like this.

Sakuta heaved himself up.

“Azusagawa, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll go to school tomorrow.”

“And then?”

“Talk to her all day.”

“And after that?”

“Go the day after too.”

“I see... and then talk to her all day again.”

“I guess so.”

“That sounds annoying.”

“Well, you wouldn’t come to the beach if I invited you, would you?”

“I’d turn you down, a hundred and twenty per cent.”

That was rather persuasive, and definitely what Rio would say.

“You were right,” she said, “there are things it’s easier to talk about when you’re not face to face.”

Sakuta pretended he couldn’t hear the last sentence and left the room, racking his brain over the increasing questions...

# Chapter 3 — Friendship Moves at 40 km/h

## 1

The next day, Monday the fourth of August, dawned bright and clear.

Sakuta stepped out onto the balcony to hang out the washing. Pure white clouds were flowing across the sky from the west to the east. There was a slight breeze, but the sun's dazzling light bathed the entire area, so it seemed today would end up rather hot as well.

The clock showed ten AM, usually, this would be where the bell sounded, but today it didn't. Instead, the phone rang.

"Yeah yeah," said Sakuta as he looked at the monochrome LCD display, upon which a familiar number was displayed. Eleven digits, starting '090', it was Shouko's mobile number. "Hello, this is Azusagawa."

"Good morning, this is Makinohara," came the answer.

"Morning," he greeted.

"Um... I'm sorry," she apologised out of nowhere.

"Hm?"

"I won't be able to visit today," she told him. Something seemed to have happened, and Sakuta was slightly worried about the downtrodden tone in her voice. They'd only been speaking for a few moments, but something was clearly bothering her.

"I see, I'll make sure to feed Hayate properly then."

"Right, thank you. And, um..."

"Yeah?"

"It's not just today... I won't be able to visit for a week, or maybe even longer."

"Are you going abroad?" He asked. Even so, she was being oddly indirect, the

‘maybe even longer’ and the general lack of surety seemed to say her plans weren’t fixed.

“No, I’m not going on a trip, but I’ll have to be away from home for a while.”

So she wouldn’t be at home for a while for something other than a trip. After a little thought, only one conclusion came to Sakuta’s mind. Sakuta had had *that*

experience in the past once before, but he didn’t want to ask Shouko the question he would need to to make certain of it.

She had been choosing her words carefully since the start of the conversation, so she probably wanted to keep Sakuta in the dark, for now, there was no need to bother her by going out of his way to ask.

“Got it, give me a call when you can come over again. I’ll look after Hayate for you.”

“I will, I’m sorry.” He heard a woman call her name from the other side of the phone, and she answered that she was coming before speaking to Sakuta again, “Until I can call again then.”

Still downtrodden, right until the end of the conversation, Shouko hung up, and Sakuta put the phone back too.

“Kaede,” he called.

“What is it?” Asked Kaede, looking up happily from her studying at the dining table.

“Makinohara-san won’t be coming for a while, so make sure to take care of Hayate too.”

“Right, leave it to me!” Kaede cried, puffing out her non-existent chest.

Later, after a slightly early lunch, Sakuta changed into his uniform to head to school.

“You’re really going then,” Rio said to him as he stepped out into the hall in his school uniform. Nasuno was rolling about her feet, fairly used to her now.

“You going to come too?”



“It would be wiser not to.”

“Why?”

“The urban legend. The one about dying after meeting a doppelgänger, or someone with the same face as you.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Both of our existences being fixed at the same time is unthinkable with quantum teleportation, so... just in case.”

“If you follow that hypothesis, what do you think would happen if you both met?”

“I suppose one of us would be removed to resolve the paradox... or perhaps the paradox would collapse and we’d both vanish.” None of this was even vaguely amusing. “There was also a rumour that a famous literary prize-winner died like that... Maybe there really is another person that experienced the same doppelgänger phenomenon as I am.”

That author had actually written a novel involving a doppelgänger. Back in elementary school when the urban legend formed... Sakuta remembered his classmates getting excited at the degree of reliability in the tale.

“That’s why it would be wiser for me to stay,” Rio finished.

“Look after the house then,” he answered, moving to the door and putting his shoes on.

“I’ll get dinner ready.”

“It’s sorta like we’re living together,” he said, intending it as a joke but making Rio’s face twist in real displeasure.

“That’s the second time today.”

The first time was that morning. Rio had said that in exchange for letting her stay, she would help with the washing. She seemed surprisingly au fait with the washing and smoothed out the creases well. Her motions showed that she normally did her own washing, and when she was putting Sakuta’s underwear to dry, he had said the same thing.

That had resulted in her throwing the pair of underwear at him.

“Now you just need to come greet me in an apron and it’ll be perfect.”

“That’s not ‘living together’, that’s ‘being newlyweds’.”

“Ah, it is?”

“Do that kind of play with Sakurajima-senpai.”

“Great idea,” he said, leaving the house with the memory of Mai’s figure in an apron in his mind.

The summer air was muggy, and the sun gradually beat down on him. Following the heat-hazes he could see on the asphalt, Sakuta walked along his usual route.

After ten minutes, he arrived at Fujisawa Station, dripping with sweat. He climbed the stairs and passed through the corridor straight to the Enoden station.

Sakuta passed through the ticket barriers as the green and cream train pulled into the station. Seeing the train from the front let it show its charming retro face as it gallantly ferried passengers from Fujisawa to Kamakura, even under the scorching sun.

Taking the opportunity to take a seat in the cool, air-conditioned carriage and cool down, Sakuta saw a familiar face board the train from a nearby station.

She was wearing Minegahara High School’s uniform, a white blouse atop a navy-blue skirt. The tie, done up to her throat, was red. It was the standard uniform that was recommended by the school, but there were actually very few students that wore it that way.

Rio’s eyes met Sakuta’s and she sat down wordlessly next to him.

A final group of panicked school girls boarded as the departure chime sounded. The doors closed a moment later then the train left the platform.

“Did you... find anything out?” Asked Rio, looking out at the passing scenery.

“That you’re amazing under your clothes,” he paused to allow her to reply, then continued when she didn’t, “though I know you’re amazing even if you

don't take them off too."

Looking at her chest now would invite derision, so he followed her example and focused on the passing scenery outside as well. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that she had her hair up again today and wasn't wearing her glasses. Actually, the other Rio was wearing them, so maybe this Rio didn't have a pair of her own.

"So you came to tell me not to do stupid things?"

"As if, too much effort."

"I can't date Mai-san, and I've got too much free time, so I figured I'd come chat to you for the day."

Rio thought for a moment.

"I see, so you came to do something that takes even more effort." Sakuta gave no answer and just looked into her face. "What?"

"You taken any other photos? Other than the ones you've uploaded."

"I have, why?"

"Show me."

Rio's expression twisted unpleasantly.

"Showing me now shouldn't matter, right?" He asked.

The light provocation prompted her to wordlessly hand over her phone. He opened the photo folder and scrolled through the previews.

"You really do..."

There were over three hundred photos there, ten times what he'd imagined.

However, they weren't just erotic images. There were some photos simply of the palm of her hand, or just her toes, along with recordings of what was in her bag.

Moving on to the older data, he found Rio wearing an unfamiliar school uniform. She was wearing a navy-blue blazer and a knee-length skirt. She looked younger than she did now, and her hair was short, but it was unmistakably her.

“What’s this?” He asked, showing her the screen.

“It’s from middle school.”

So she was taking selfies even back then, that was a strong tradition.

“There are quite a few with your face or full-body shots.”

The older the images, the stronger that trend was. And the newer the photos were, the less often her face appeared. In contrast, photos showing the lines of her underwear or glimpses of skin with strong hints of sexuality increased.

“At first, I wasn’t going to show anyone or upload them.”

“It’s just an album of yourself?”

“Are you trying to make me out to be a trying woman?”

“You already are, right?”

“Maybe so,” Rio smiled derisively at herself. Sakuta thought that it was a bad smile, and he didn’t want to see Rio make that kind of face. “When I started, I think I just wanted to look at them objectively and think I was doing something stupid.”

“What for?” He asked.

“Seeing my stupidity for myself refreshed me.”

It was growing further and further from Sakuta’s understanding.

“It would be amusing to call it self-analysis,” she continued, “but I think it’s actually a type of self-harm.”

The things she was saying were far from being funny, but saying it about yourself could indeed be humorous. Even being aware of that, Rio was continuing, and certainly escalating.

“You might not understand, Azusagawa... but I hate myself.”

“The other Futaba said that too.”

Her body’s growth had caused it, she had experienced the reaction of the boys to that and said that it had made her feel filthy. From that, she had grown to hate her feminine nature.

“That’s why I hurt myself, because I hate myself.”

“So you suppress yourself, and that makes you feel better even if it’s just for a moment?”

“You’re smarter than you look.”

“But the one suppressing yourself, in the end, is you, right?”

So it wouldn’t solve anything. Once some time had passed, she would, of course, notice that she had gone back to being herself. She would look back on her actions and hate her weakness. Then she would hate herself even more, and repeat the same thing yet again to hurt herself. Each time her actions would grow in severity and go further towards extremes.

That vicious spiral assailed her heart with instability. Then the result was this, an outbreak of Adolescence Syndrome and a division of her consciousness... together that brought two Futaba Rios into existence.

Rio was carrying a paradox within herself that couldn’t be reconciled by herself.

He had no intention to say he could understand that, but there was a single point Sakuta could empathise with. Kaede had been in her first year of middle school when she was bullied. Sakuta couldn’t do anything when she was suffering right in front of him. The powerlessness and cowardice that had formed in his heart at the time had eaten at Sakuta from the inside rather than the outside.

Consumed by disgust at himself, Sakuta kept condemning himself, and at the end of those days of hatred, Sakuta had had three scars carved into his chest. If there was a single reason for those wounds, he would think of them as a punishment he gave himself, a sign of shame for not being able to help his younger sister.

“Say, Azusagawa?”

“Hm?”

“Whose side are you on?”

“I’m on Futaba Rio’s side,” he answered without the slightest hesitation.

“Clever answer,” she told him.

“Woah, from down on high.”

“However, ‘we’ can’t understand each other.”

“Don’t be selfish.”

“From on high from you, too.”

“I’m the type of guy that doesn’t have any restraint with his friends,” said Sakuta, despite the embarrassment, he knew that Rio would push back, but instead she smiled slightly.

“Then I’ll say this without restraint as well... Giving up on one of us would be quicker.”

“Quit it with the scary stuff, I’ll wet myself.”

“If you’re answering with that, you should understand, right?” The train stopped at Shichirigahama, “The world doesn’t need two Futaba Rios.”

Her voice was somehow cold as she spoke, before standing from her seat and alighting from the train. The chime of the train departing sounded immediately afterwards.

While Sakuta was searching for a reply, the doors closed and the train continued on with Sakuta still in his seat.

“Seriously, quit it with the scary stuff, I really will piss myself,” he said to himself. The only one to hear him was the woman sitting next to him, who discretely pulled away from him, making him add, “I’m joking.”

Of course, she didn’t move closer to him again.

Sakuta had thought to get off at the next station, Inamuragasaki, but ended up riding all the way to the terminus at Kamakura.

Again, ending up outside of the station, he went into a shop that caught his eye and bought five pigeon-shaped shortbread biscuits, the representative souvenir for Kamakura. They had been a familiar food to Sakuta, from the Kanagawa Prefecture himself, for his entire life, on the same level as shumai.

Souvenirs in one hand, Sakuta returned to the train station and quietly

retraced his steps to the Enoden.

This time, he got off at Shichirigahama. It was a bit of a detour but Sakuta arrived safely at school, albeit forty minutes later than planned.

“Here, a souvenir,” said Sakuta as he placed a yellow bag of pigeon shortbread on the table Rio was using when he walked into the lab.

“What did you do.”

“The emergency called for a visit to Kamakura.”

“I see,” she said disinterestedly, even as she reached out for the package. She seemed to have just brewed some coffee, and would have it to accompany the drink. Apparently, Rio was one of the ones to start with the tail.

Sakuta, who started with the head, took one as well.

“Have you decided which one of us you’ll go with?” She asked.

“You know, Futaba?”

“What?”

“Decide that sorta stuff on your own.”

Rio gave no answer for a moment, so Sakuta continued, “You should decide things about yourself  
*for yourself.*”

“I see, that’s logical.”

Sakuta pulled a stool from under a desk and sat down. Then, to fill the space, he reached out for the remote for the TV and hit the power button. The TV at the side of the board, hanging from the ceiling, lit up. Shown on the screen was an afternoon variety show.

A familiar face was looking into the camera and presenting a segment about a sand art competition on some beach. The presenter Nanjou Fumika was holding a microphone and looking into the camera, apparently away from the studio again today.

“Look at this wonderful piece!” Came the woman’s excited voice as she showcased the sand sculpture. Filling the screen was the famous Sagrada

Família from Barcelona, with all eighteen towers completed as well. It was perfect, certainly as wonderful as Fumika had said. The other contestants' pieces paled in comparison.

"These two people here are the creators," she continued, introducing a man and woman. They both looked to be in their mid-twenties. The man was tall and slender, wearing glasses that gave him a handsome air as he smiled with nary a flinch at the camera's presence. The woman was petite, and had a cute face. Despite that, she still had a great figure, that much was visible even through the T-shirt she was wearing atop her swimsuit. Her red bikini showed through her shirt, holding the swell of her chest tightly, and her shirt fell just short of her toned stomach, giving a peek at her tight waist.

She was rather similar in height to Rio and he found his eyes looking her way to compare them.

"I'm not that thin," said Rio, reading his mind. Though on the other hand, that could be taken as an agreement for the rest. Maybe she'd look even better than Sakuta thought out of her clothes.

"Are you two in a relationship?" Asked Fumika on the television.

"You're prettier in real life, aren't you?" The man asked in return, ignoring her question, but at the twitch of her eyebrow, he continued smoothly, "She's my wife."

Immediately, the woman showed the gleaming ring around her finger, making a sparkling

*ping* sound as she did.

"You're rather young, are you newlyweds?" Fumika questioned further.

"Not at all, we got married at eighteen."

The man looked off into the distance. To get married at eighteen, quite a lot must have happened. Maybe he was thinking of those hardships. Sakuta would be eighteen next year, but the concept of marriage still felt like some term from a fantasy.

"G-getting married at eighteen is quite impressive," said Fumika, thrown by



the unexpected answer before turning the microphone to the woman, “Now then, this was mostly made by you, so where there any particularly difficult parts?”

“I’ll be bringing it out at the event at Kugenuma on the twenty-thiiiiird! Come get a handshake there!” The woman suddenly yelled, completely ignoring the mood. Sakuta didn’t have a clue what she was on about. She then advanced on the camera making mock roars. Then, the man... her husband, grabbed her arms from behind and took her out of frame.

Fumika was taken aback, but soon regained her composure.

“Let’s go back to the studio,” she deflected with a smile. Once back in the studio, which was slightly out of it too, the main host followed up with the adverts.

The screen switched, showing another familiar person, Mai this time. It was a shampoo advert, her smooth and glossy hair was swept out and then settled back into order as the narration said, “Soft and supple, every day.” At the same time, Mai laughed slightly in front of the mirror, like she was ticklish. It was a devastating expression combining both cuteness and beauty. No matter how many times he saw it, it would take his breath away, it was a great sight.

As the TV switched to another advert, Sakuta picked up a hand fan from the desk and moved to by the window. The air conditioning seemed a little weak, so it was a touch hot in the room as he fanned himself.

As he looked outside, he could see five people running around the fields. The one running out in front was Yuuma, so they were probably basketball club members.

“Say, Futaba?”

“What?”

“How do you think you can go back to being one?” He asked suddenly, still looking out of the window.

*“The world doesn’t need two Futaba Rios.”*

Rio herself had said that, and it had remained in Sakuta’s mind the entire

time. Uploading the suggestive photos was an issue, but the case of Adolescence Syndrome couldn't be left alone either.

"We can't."

"If you're saying that because of the personality divergence, you could if they went back to being one?"

"...Maybe," Rio answered negligently and like she had given up.

"How do we do that then?"

"Currently at least, we're diverging more and more. We're doing different things and have different memories and experiences. As they become more disordered, I don't think we can go back to being one."

"Be a bit more optimistic, I'll get ulcers."

"I suppose once we feel the same then."

"Filled with love for Kunimi?"

His only reply was a cold silence. If he turned around, he was sure she'd be glaring daggers at him, so he didn't turn.

"I think we both already feel the same with those feelings," she said eventually.

"Go back to being one then," he said.

"The fact that we haven't might mean that it needs stronger feelings."

"Do you have stronger feelings for anything other than Kunimi?" Sakuta didn't think so at least.

"I don't know," surrendered Rio. It felt like he'd asked an unanswerable question. His expression twisted and he switched his attention to the last of his biscuit. As he chewed the remnants of the tail, Yuuma finished circling around the fields and approached the building.

Yuuma's eyes met Sakuta's, and his expression relaxed slightly when he noticed him. He then came running right over to Sakuta before practically collapsing against the wall.

"Ah, I'm dead!" Sakuta heard as he opened the window.

He was gasping for breath and sweat trickled off him onto the concrete.

“You’ve got a good thing in your hand there,” said Yuuma, looking up at Sakuta as he leaned out of the window. Yuuma made a fanning motion with his hand, asking Sakuta to fan him. As proof, his eyes were focused on the fan in Sakuta’s hand.

“Nope,” said Sakuta.

“Why?”

“I don’t have a reason to service you.”

“Breeze please!” Yuuma implored.

Ignoring that, Sakuta turned back to face the lab.

“Futaba,” he called, beckoning her from preparing test tubes.

“What?” She asked, moving towards them even as she frowned.

He handed the fan over to her.

“Fan Kunimi.”

“He asked you, didn’t he?”

“If you’re gonna get fanned, it should be a girl doing it.”

Her unhappy expression was at least half embarrassment.

“Futaba, breeze please!” Cried Yuuma piteously, completely exhausted.

After a moment of thought, Rio wordlessly flapped the fan back and forth.

“Ahhh, that feels good.”

The other four members were still running, staggering onwards around the fields.

“The club’s in the gym, right? Why are you five running alone?” Sakuta asked. There should be more members.

“It was a penalty for losing the friendly.”

“You lost?”

“My team was all first years,” he defended.

“Pushing the blame onto your teammates isn’t like you. You must be a fake.”

“The hell do you think of me?”

“That you’re irritatingly popular.”

“You bastard,” Kunimi replied, before breaking out into laughter.

“It really is a mystery how you two became friends,” Rio muttered, almost to herself.

Yuuma just grinned broadly, and Sakuta followed his example. He didn’t really want to answer her, and had never put it into words. Anyway, putting it into words was difficult, at its most basic, they just got along. They said what they wanted to each other without restraint, and Kunimi had always had an atmosphere about him that let you know whether he was joking or not.

He could say the same about Rio too. The first time they had properly spoken was in the first term of their first year, after the rumour of Sakuta turning violent and sending his classmates to the hospital had already spread.

At the time, Sakuta had been looking for somewhere he could eat his lunch in peace and ended up at the physics lab, but there was already someone there.

“I’m impressed you can show up to school every day with everyone looking at you like that, Azusagawa,” Rio had said, in his class at the time.

“Thinking ‘everyone’s avoiding me’ is probably too self-conscious,” he had answered.

“I don’t think it is at all. Are you alright in the head? Actually, obviously you’re not, you’re coming to school.”

“You’re interesting, Futaba.”

“Huh? How?”

“Talking to me like this means you’re the same.”

That had been how it all started, with a conversation with not a hint of reservation in it. He could remember it well even now, and the feeling between them hadn’t changed even a little despite over a year having passed.

“One last dash!” Called Yuuma to the four first-years, causing them all to put

on a spurt of speed, all stampeding for Yuuma as if competing.

Reaching him, they all fell forwards, supporting themselves with their hands on their knees, gasping for breath.

“Ah, no fair!” They shouted at Yuuma getting fanned by Rio, “You’ve got a girlfriend and you’re gettin’ another girl to do that, why’re you the only popular one!?”

Sakuta was in agreement there and nodded deeply.

“Come on, introduce us to that wonderful girl.”

“She a second-year?”

“Huh, you lot don’t know Futaba?” He asked.

Rio was a little famous within the school, she was known as the weird second-year that always wore a lab coat. Even though they were in different years, they should have realised that too.

“Eh?” The four of them noised in surprise, looking at each other.

“She was this cute?” One of them said quietly, but Sakuta could clearly hear them. Rio wasn’t wearing her lab coat now, her hair was up, and she wasn’t wearing her glasses, so the impression she gave was too different and they couldn’t tell. Sakuta had been the same at first.

“You lot ain’t discerning enough, I ain’t going to introduce you. Come on, back to the gym,” Yuuma shooed them away. They left, occasionally looking back and talking between themselves, getting more excited:

“Second-years really do look adult.”

“She’s just my type.”

“She’s sexy-smart! Actually, smart-sexy!”

“Damn, I want her to *teach* me some things.”

“Gotta say, I don’t think much of your discernment either,” Sakuta chided Yuuma as he watched the first-years leave. In his mind though, he was thinking something different.

He was remembering this Rio’s words.

*“The world doesn’t need two Futaba Rios.”*

It was certainly true, the world couldn’t accept two Futaba Rios. They couldn’t both come to school when the second term arrived, and they couldn’t both live in the same house. There were also problems with what would happen with residence certificates and on top of that, it was unquestionable that the Rio currently having a social life was this Rio. The Rio living at Sakuta’s house was only known to a very few people.

So things couldn’t continue like this. Though Sakuta hadn’t been taught how to make two people into one at school. Rio had said about strong attachments, but he couldn’t think of anything she was more attached to than Kunimi.

“Seriously, what do I do,” he muttered to himself.

“Hm?” Kunimi asked in response.

“Nothing,” evaded Sakuta, having nothing else he could do.

## 2

“So, how long are you going to keep this up?” Asked Futaba with no preamble as they sat at Shichirigahama Station, waiting for the train home.

Today it was already the twelve of August and Sakuta had spent every day for the last week in the lab with Rio.

“Till you stop doing that stuff I guess,” he answered.

Even now, Rio was uploading risqué photos. He had checked on his way home from work last night and she had posted an image of a test tube in her cleavage, apparently in response to the demands to ‘put something between them’, but it was probably just Sakuta who thought it seemed even sillier, and not particularly erotic.

“Or you could just show them to me I suppose,” he added.

“You’re getting further from your goal each day then.”

“That’s a shame.”

He leaned forwards and looked up towards Kamakura, there was still no train.

The clock was ticking towards six PM, but the sky was still light, with just a tinge of red in the west.

“What are we doing tomorrow?” He asked. There had been a lot of fairly dull experiments in the last week, mostly using a trolley to measure things like gravitational acceleration. There was no interest in just seeing things that were easily broken down and understood.

“Maybe we can make a rocket so you don’t get bored?”

“Seriously?”

“A bottle rocket, yes.”

“You can go and fetch them.”

“That supposed to be helping? This is when you’re supposed to have a contest to see whose rocket goes further.”

“Well, it won’t be much of a contest with you,” she said, looking at her phone. Some kind of notification seemed to have gone off.

The moment she looked at the screen, her shoulders shook and her expression clearly tightened. She soon looked away from the screen but then checked again, and the blood drained from her face. Seeming to remember something, she hid her phone. Putting it face down on her thighs and then covering it with both hands.

“What’s wrong?” Asked Sakuta.

“Nothing,” she replied without looking at him, surveying the other people waiting for their train. There were several Minegahara students and groups of students scattered about the platform. While she was doing that, her phone buzzed.

“Futaba?”

“...It’s fine,” she insisted. It didn’t look like it was ‘fine’ at all, her reactions were delayed and her voice was faint. Looking, he could see that her hands in her lap were shaking too, in a way that had nothing to do with her phone’s vibration.

“Someone reply?”

Rio simply gave a small nod.

“Can I look?” He asked, gesturing towards her hidden phone with his eyes.

“No.”

Even so, Sakuta reached out his hand and touched the phone case between her fingers.

Hunching slightly, Rio didn't really resist him pulling the phone out, essentially letting him look.

He checked the phone in his hand. Shown on the screen were several direct messages.

*“That’s Minegahara’s uniform, right?”*

Said the first message.

*“I used to go there, I can tell.”*

Came the second after mere seconds.

*“I’m nearby today, let’s meet up?”*

The third continued, and as he was reading it, several short messages came in succession:

*“I can pay my way, 15k?”*

*“If you don’t, I’ll tell your school.”*

*“Risky, ain’t it?”*

*“Hey, let’s meet, will you?”*

Rio, watching from his side, gripped at the hem of his shirt uneasily, her shaking intensifying, directly showing him how uneasy she was.

“So people like this actually exist,” he said as he manipulated the phone, writing out a message. Even as he did, the messages didn't stop.

*“I wanna meeeeet.”*

*“I’m waiting.”*

*“Oi, you listening?”*



*“Don’t blame me.”*

The piled up as he was typing. It was an annoyance, but Sakuta completed the message he had been typing.

“Azusagawa?”

He sent it regardless.

“What was that!?” She asked.

He showed the screen to Rio, the message still showing.

*“I’m calling the police.”*

At that message, the phone had fallen dead silent, the messages stopping.

“It should be fine now,” he said.

“...Delete it.”

“Hm?”

“Delete... that account.”

“Got it...” he said, keeping the screen visible to Rio so she could make sure he was doing it correctly as he deleted the account. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” she answered before they boarded the train to Fujisawa. A group of older women returning from Fujisawa had bags of souvenirs, and there were also young couples that seemed to have gone to the beach along with university student groups.

Sakuta guided Rio into an empty seat right in the middle of the carriage. For the entire time, she kept her grip on his shirt. He could feel the warm gazes from around, they apparently looked like a new couple.

“Sorry,” Rio said quietly, “It’s what I deserve, but...”

Her body and voice both held a deep fear, she was utterly terrified.

“I don’t really get it... I’m just really scared...” she continued, her shaking still not having stopped, as he could tell from where their shoulders were touching.

“Emails and messages stab right into you,” he said in his usual tone, still looking forwards.

Rio made a questioning noise.

“It’s something... the counsellor told me when Kaede was bullied, humans take in about eighty per cent of their information in through their eyes.”

“...That seems likely.”

“That’s why there’s more impact from a message or a letter telling you to die than from just being told it verbally.”

On top of that, they were sudden too, if there was someone in front of you, you could generally gauge how the conversation was going and be ready for it, but a digital letter sent out of nowhere could easily surprise you and suddenly gouge malice into your heart before you were ready.

That was exactly the situation that Rio was in now.

Arriving at Fujisawa Station, Sakuta passed through the Odakyu-Enoshima Line ticket gates. Normally he’d walk on home from here, but he couldn’t do that today.

At a glance, the platform was long enough that it looked like a terminus. However, even without a dedicated rail, you could catch the train both up and down the line through the switch back towards either Shinjuku or Katase-Enoshima.

“Um... I’m sorry,” Rio apologised as they were walking alongside the other passengers. She was probably apologising for causing him trouble or being a nuisance.

She couldn’t remove her hand from his shirt, possibly because of how long she’d held the grip.

“I got to see you being cute, so I’ll just brag about it to Kunimi.”

She glared at him wordlessly, but still in the midst of her fear, she looked closer to crying.

They boarded the train as it arrived. He couldn’t leave her alone like this, so Sakuta was planning on taking her home.

The white train with a blue line on it left the station right on schedule. Because Rio lived near Honkugenuma Station, which was only one stop down

the line, it didn't take long to arrive. From there, they walked for about five minutes.

"We're here," murmured Rio quietly, stopping on the corner of a quiet residential street. It was a calm street with detached houses lined up along it. The biggest buildings of flats nearby were only about five storeys tall and the sky seemed more open.

Rio put her hand on the wide double gate. Above it was an archway decorated with delicate ornaments, just looking at it gave the impression that rich people owned the house.

Entering, it grew even more apparent, tasteful, wide slabs of stone paved the way to the fashionable, cuboid house. There was a large garage to the side that looked to have an automatic door on it, it could easily fit three cars inside.

"This is definitely something," Sakuta couldn't help but say.

"It's just a cold-looking house," Rio said unimpressed.

"Well, it doesn't look like anyone lives here, no," he agreed. It felt like something you'd see on a TV show to promote the Shonan area.

"That's normally where you disagree."

"Don't expect so much of me."

"Well, that's true."

They finally arrived at the door and Rio produced her key, unlocking the door. The lights were on, but no one was home. There was probably some sensor near the gate that turned them on.

The time was just passing seven, and even though the sky was light, it was starting to show hints of night.

"Make sure you lock the door," he told her.

"Azusagawa," she said, holding the door and looking back at him with an uneasy look on her face.

"Hm?"

Honestly, he knew what she was going to say without asking. She was still

scared because of the message from some unknown man, and couldn't shake it off.

"Um... I want you to stay here tonight," she said faintly, but still clearly.

"Your parents?"

"My Father has gone to Germany for work, and Mother is in Europe for a business meeting."

"That sounds like something out of a drama."

"It happens fairly often for us."

"Just making sure you know, but I *am* a guy."

"If anything happens, I'll tell Sakurajima-senpai about everything that you did or didn't do."

"Just stick to the things I did."

"I trust you."

"I'd personally rather be the kind of guy you felt on guard around though."

"Idiot, get in."

"Scuse me then."

He went inside and the silence deepened. The crinkling of their uniforms sounded awfully loud in the quiet. The entrance was more of an atrium, so that would probably happen.

Following Rio, he stepped into a similarly huge living room. It was probably about twenty tatami mats in size, or about thirty square metres. The decoration was relatively monotone, based on black and white. In front of a comfy looking sofa was a massive sixty-inch TV, and a well-maintained garden was visible through the window.

The kitchen was open plan, and within the glass-fronted cabinets had spices and tableware lined up in them like a showroom. The hall itself was all lit fashionably with indirect lighting.

The entire area was simple and refined, but still had an air of luxuriousness about it, the kind of house anyone would want to live in.

However, there was something missing from the house in Sakuta's opinion. He could feel it even before entering the house. It had no scent to it, no character.

As a place to store things, it was wonderful, but it somehow didn't feel like Rio

*lived*

here, there was no warmth to the house. He was assaulted by the sensation of being lost in an unfamiliar place, just standing there made him uneasy.

"Are your family often not at home?" He asked.

"That's not the case."

"I see."

"Only for about half the year."

"Oi, that's often."

It was too often. When she had denied it, Sakuta had expected something like two or three times for a year. But at the same time, he could strangely see it being the case, the house wouldn't feel like this if that weren't the case, if her parents came home each night, that wouldn't have happened.

"Father rents a room close to the hospital, and Mother is often abroad for her business, so this is normal."

"In what world is this supposed to be *normal*?"

Now he understood why the other Rio was so at home with cooking and washing, because she lived alone here for half the year, so of course she was used to it.

"This is normal here. Neither of them are suited to being parents," she told him unconcernedly, almost as if informing him of something that was common knowledge. It looked like she didn't feel anything about that anymore, she had given up long ago and it had become normal... That was the impression Sakuta got. "It seems that Father married for success within the hospital."

"The hell?"

“Apparently, it’s a world you cannot succeed as a bachelor.”

“And your mother agreed?”

“Mother married because she wanted the title of ‘Professor Futaba’s Wife’, so they both had the advantages. They both do what they like as well, so neither of them are unhappy. You have a surprisingly old-fashioned way of thinking.”

“Well, I’m a primitive that doesn’t have a smartphone in this day and age.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“My cute little junior said it.”

“Ah, Laplace’s Imp from before, she has a point,” said Rio, laughing slightly. She normally wouldn’t have laughed at something like that. He didn’t know if she realised, but she was distracting attention by forcing herself to laugh. Rio quickly turned on the necessary lights and pressed the button to fill the bath.

“Once it’s done, go on ahead,” she told him.

“Sure thing,” he answered, reluctant to tell her that he’d go after in this situation, so took her invitation and was soon entering the bath.

Just as he was considering that and entering the bath, Rio told him, “Don’t come out until the washing and drying is done.”

“How long?”

“Thirty minutes.”

“Are you trying to kill me?”

Mercilessly, no reply was forthcoming.

Switching with Sakuta, who was now light-headed, Rio spent an hour bathing. She told him to wait outside while she did. Apparently, she really didn’t want to be alone. With no other options, Sakuta sat himself down against the wall outside, just as he had talked with the other Rio twice before.

“Azusagawa.”

“I’m here,” he answered.

“Right...”

Silence fell for several moments, before, “Azusagawa?”

“Here.”

“Right...” Before once more, “Az-”

“I’m still here!”

The conversation repeated several times.

“Say, Azusagawa?”

“This is annoying, want me to just get in with you?”

“...If you keep your eyes closed the entire time,” she answered after a slight pause. Rio would absolutely never say that normally, it was proof of her doubt.

“No way, that’d just be torture.”

“Sing a song or something then.”

“That’s even worse!”

After Rio finished her long bath, they had a simple meal. Using that wonderful kitchen, they had prepared cup ramen. Sakuta couldn’t help but laugh at the amusing scene, but Rio didn’t seem to see anything odd about it. She lived here though, so that was only natural.

While they waited the three minutes, he phoned home and let Kaede know that he wouldn’t be coming home tonight. The two of them then sat down in front of the TV and ate their noodles. Instead of music, Rio put a foreign drama on the Blu-Ray player and they whiled away the time.

Though that said, trying to appreciate a drama for five consecutive hours certainly did wear on them.

“Let’s sleep,” said Rio as the clock hands swung around to half-past one in the morning and their eyes grew heavy.

Rio, having been wearing pyjamas since she left the bath, stepped onto the stairs. They were the fluffy pyjamas he had seen in one of the photos before. The bottoms were shorts, so her legs drew the eye a little.

Thinking that he couldn’t just follow her to her room, Sakuta stopped at the bottom of the stairs. As he did, Rio noticed him stop and turned around mid-

way up the stairs.

“We’ll sleep in the living room actually,” she decided.

“What a shame, I thought it was my chance to pay my respects to your room.”

“It’s because you talk like that that I don’t want to show you. You’d talk to Kunimi about it too.”

“Well yeah, I already said.”

“Hahh...”

Rio returned to the living room and used the sofa in place of a bed. Sakuta... after moving the table next to it a little to make some space, quietly lay down on the floor.

The carpet was soft, so it wasn’t uncomfortable. If anything, it was fairly nice, a big change from Sakuta’s own floor.

“Night then,” he said.

“Yeah, night”

While they were watching the TV, Sakuta had been yawning constantly, but now that he lay down, he wasn’t sleepy in the slightest.

It was convenient at first when he decided to stay up until Rio had fallen asleep, but... It was already close to an hour since Rio had laid down on the sofa. Guessing from her uneven breathing, she definitely wasn’t asleep.

Slowly, she let out a long breath, the kind you did when mentally sorting something, an intent sigh.

As he listed, Sakuta gazed up at the ceiling, cast in a pallid light from the faint illumination through the crack in the curtain.

After a while, Rio spoke:

“Azusagawa, are you awake?”

“I’m asleep.”

“So you *are* up.”

“I’m sleeping now,” he said, forcing a yawn. He wanted Rio to fall asleep, if



she was awake, her unease would just create worse thoughts. Nothing was better than sleep when you were troubled, you could think later.

“I think I was scared,” she admitted.

He gave her no answer.

“I’ve got you and Kunimi now, but I was sure I’d end up alone again.”

“Why’d you think that?”

“I wasn’t so uneasy until I entered high school. I was always alone, whether it was at home or at school. Then I met you and Kunimi and grew to dislike it...”

“Kunimi’s a bad guy, huh?”

“It’s half your fault. I didn’t enjoy going to school up until middle school, but after high school, I enjoyed it a little.”

“Just a little?”

“Well do you enjoy school?” She asked.

“Nope, just a bit at best.”

“It’s the same,” she said.

But that ‘just a little’ had made Rio uneasy. If people came to enjoy something, they would want it to continue forever, and if they thought they might lose it, they would grow uneasy. “When Kunimi got a girlfriend, I was terrified...”

“That’s where you’re supposed to think ‘why *her*?’.”

“I did...”

“So you did, nice, Futaba.”

“But a gorgeous girl like her suits him. I wouldn’t go together with him.”

“Man, Kunimi’s awful, he just keeps making you sad.”

“You can’t talk either.”

“Huh?”

He’d thought he was safe, but apparently not.

“You got a beautiful girlfriend yourself, so I thought you’d stop caring about me.”

“Moron,” he snorted, “It’s true that I’m head over heels for Mai-san-”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone say head over heels, when was that even used?” Rio laughed.

“But I’m going to have you be my friend for the rest of my life,” he finished.

“You don’t have friends either, huh?”

“That’s right, so don’t just fade out, I’ll cry.”

Rio didn’t answer, seeming to keep her distance.

“Besides, you don’t get a thing.”

“About what?”

“You’ve fallen for Kunimi, but you don’t get him at all.”

“That’s not tr-”

“It is true,” Sakuta interrupted her, “I’m borrowing your phone.”

He turned on the phone he was still looking after, the backlight illuminating his face.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll show you just how amazing Kunimi is, you’ll fall for him all over again.”

Yuuma’s phone number was displayed on the screen, and Sakuta pressed the call button.

“Azusagawa, you can’t!” Rio cried, bolting upright, “He’ll think I’m ridiculous, calling at this time of night...”

On her face were panic and confusion... and also the feelings of a maiden in love. A desire to not have Yuuma hate her was written on her face.

“It’s too late,” said Sakuta as he put the phone to his ear and listened to the dial tone. However, at half-past two in the morning, it was unlikely he’d pick up, but Sakuta didn’t doubt him.

The call connected on the sixth ring.

“Ngh, Futaba?” Came Yuuma’s sleepy voice, he really had been asleep it seemed.

“It’s me.”

“Sakuta, what?” Frankly speaking, Sakuta was disappointed, that reaction was too dull. Even so, realising who it was without Sakuta naming himself was just like Yuuma.

“Futaba’s in trouble, come to Honkugenuma Station right now.”

“Right, got it,” he said, his tone suddenly changing, like he had leapt out of bed, “I’ll be right there.”

Immediately after giving his short answer, Yuuma hung up. Because of the volume, Rio had been able to hear the last sentence as well.

Sakuta turned the phone off again and stood up, Rio just watched him blankly from the sofa.

“Kunimi’s coming,” he told her.

“You’re insane.”

“Kunimi’s the insane one, agreeing to come right away at this time of night.

Yuuma lived to the north of Fujisawa Station, about three or four kilometres from here. The trains obviously weren’t running, so he’d have to find some other way there, and that would take a fair amount of time.

“You should wash your face,” he told her. She hadn’t been crying, but her eyes were puffy, “get dressed too.”

Her fluffy pyjamas were fairly cute, but he couldn’t take her out like that.

“Are you telling me to dress up?”

“Just get changed normally.”

“Wait outside then.”

Sakuta walked out to the entrance, leaving Rio in the living room.

It was about fifteen minutes since he had stepped outside, and his backside was getting quite familiar with the stone slabs he was sat on.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Rio somewhat shyly.

It seemed like she had washed her face and freshened up like Sakuta had said, and her hair was held up by a scrunchie. She was wearing a baggy T-shirt that didn’t show off her body. She was covered from head to toe, wearing jeans under the shirt, only showing her ankles.

He looked closely at her outfit in deference to the time she’d kept in waiting.

“W-what?” She asked, putting herself on guard.

“It doesn’t show enough, do it again,” he said, pointing inside.

“I don’t want to keep Kunimi waiting,” she said, walking off towards the station. Her sandals had slight heels, not even making her taller by five centimetres. That was the most she could do right now it seemed.

“Well, it’s a good effort for you.”

“Why do you have to talk down to me like that?”

“I just think that if you’re wearing that kind of top then you should wear shorts underneath.”

As she walked, Rio looked down at her hips.

“Then it would look like I wasn’t wearing anything.”

“That’s good, presentation is important.”

“...Um, Azusagawa,” she suddenly spoke, her tone dropping.

“Hm?”

“Is this really not good enough?” She asked, looking uneasily up at him.

“Who knows, I don’t know Kunimi’s tastes.”

“I was asking for your opinion, as a boy,” she said, her angry voice belying her nervous gaze.

“I think it’s good, very you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sakuta was sure that nothing he said would get rid of those feelings, that was why they were going to meet Yuuma.

Of course, it being three AM, they didn't encounter anyone, the first person they saw was when they arrived at the station, a silhouette straddling a bike just by the ticket gates, wiping the sweat from their forehead with their shirt sleeve,

"You're late," he said with a laugh, noticing Sakuta and Rio and riding gently over to them. Yuuma came out into the light. Sakuta really hadn't expected him to already be here, he must have raced off immediately after he had finished on the phone and ridden full pelt.

"You're just too early."

"You were the one that told me to come flying, Sakuta."

"What, are you just made of muscle?"

"Well, close enough," he said before moving on from Sakuta and looking at Rio, "are you okay, Futaba?"

"Eh?" She answered.

"Did Sakuta do anything to you?"

"As if I would."

"I was sure you'd gone after her or something."

"Why would I have called you then?"

"Maybe a guilty conscience? Actually, I guess you don't have a conscience like that."

Even though he'd ridden here so late at night, Yuuma was just the same as always.

"Why..." said Rio with a sigh.

"Why..." she repeated. And then everything all happened at once.

Tears welled up in her eyes and then tracked down her cheeks, dripping off like heavy rain onto the asphalt.

"Why... why..." she kept repeating.

"Don't make her cry, Kunimi."

“This is my fault?” Yuuma winced at Sakuta’s reproach, probably even more than he would have had he known the situation.

“It’s definitely your fault.”

“Well damn,” said Yuuma, scratching his head in real worry.

“It’s not his fault...” Rio said tearfully, wiping at her face with both hands, almost like a child would cry.

“It’s not his fault...” she repeated, to make sure it had gotten through her tears, “Don’t cause trouble...”

She moved her hands from her face and glared at him, but in this situation, he couldn’t see anything but a child ready to cry.

“You’ve got a pretty cute way of crying,” said Sakuta, making her look down in embarrassment.

“Don’t ask me... It’s been so long...”

Maybe she didn’t know how to cry because of that, she had just grown into high school with the same way of crying as a child.

“But... But...” she started, once again becoming overcome with emotion and starting to cry again, “I... I...”

She sniffled, her face already messy.

“I wasn’t alone...” she finished, “I wasn’t alone...”

Rio was crying with a peaceful expression, so Sakuta didn’t say a word. Yuuma likewise, while not understanding the reasoning, quietly watched over her. Rio repeated herself several times, murmuring to herself. She tried to stop her tears, but was assaulted by a new wave each time.

“Sakuta.”

“Hm?”

“Go buy me and Futaba a drink.”

“I don’t get why you’re exploiting me, ain’t the foggiest.”

“We’ve got to rehydrate,” Yuuma said triumphantly.

“Sure, it ain’t great though, but well, today’s special.”

“I’m fine with something fizzy, what about you, Futaba?” Yuuma asked.

“I’ll have an iced coffee,” she said, still looking firmly towards the nearby convenience store even as she cried. Apparently, a vending machine wasn’t good enough.

Grumbling, “Don’t blame me if you can’t sleep,” Sakuta gave in and headed in.

Sakuta, having entered alone, picked up a blue-labelled sports drink from the shelf. A two-litre bottle just to annoy Yuuma. He took it to the till and had the university-age looking person manning it add an iced coffee to the order. As he did, the fireworks display next to the till caught his eye. He picked one up and added that before paying the total.

“Thank you for your patronage,” the attendant said listlessly as he left.

When he exited, he arrived next to Yuuma and Rio, and Rio’s face was slightly red.

“Did he say something perverted,” asked Sakuta.

“He didn’t, it was about my clothes...” Rio told him quietly, and judging from her reddened cheeks, it was probably praise. That was Yuuma for you... he understood.

Sakuta passed over the coffee in his hand with a straw already inside. Then he took the bottle from the bag and handed it to Yuuma, it was the one from Mai’s advert.

“You’ve been totally domesticated by Sakurajima-senpai, haven’t you,” Rio laughed, traces of tears still on her face, but finally having stopped crying.

“He’s devoted in the weirdest ways,” Yuuma said, not complaining about it not being a fizzy drink, nor even commenting about the bottle size. Actually, he drained half the bottle in a single draught. Apparently, he really had been thirsty. He put the bottle and what was left in his bike’s basket.

“So what are we doing now?” Yuuma asked, still sat on his bike. The time was passed three AM.

“This,” Sakuta answered, putting the bag in his basket as well, letting the

fireworks set he had just bought show itself.

“Is there even anywhere nearby we can light fireworks at this time of night?”

Looking in both directions, it was a completely residential area, so he could understand Yuuma’s feelings.

“What about the beach?”

“It’s a fairly long walk from here,” said Rio calmly, the most familiar with the area.

“If I ride with Futaba on the back of the bike, and you run, it should take about ten minutes.”

“You do know it’s my bike?”

“What, you’re saying that Futaba should run?”

“I’m saying you should,” Yuuma laughed as he surrendered the bike to Sakuta. He was stretching, particularly his Achilles tendon, completely ready to run.

“Well, making you run wouldn’t be too different from just walking.”

“Don’t make fun of me. I’d have to take breaks, it’d take longer.”

“Don’t sound so proud about it,” Yuuma cackled, but soon remembered what time it was and stifled his laughter.

“Futaba,” said Sakuta, urging her to get on the bike.

“I’m going on ahead,” said Yuuma, meaning that Rio couldn’t refuse, nor would she hold back.

“We’ll get arrested for riding on one bike together,” she said aghast, but still sitting side saddle on the rack on the rear, holding tightly to the saddle.

“You could hold on to me instead you know.”

“You really are a pervert.”

“It was a jo-oooh.”

The strange noise was because Rio had unexpectedly grabbed onto him, putting her arms around his waist and clinging to his back, a soft sensation across his back.



“I’ll make sure to tell Sakurajima-senpai you were lusting after me.”

“She’ll start scolding me, I’ll look forward to it.

“And that’s why you’re a low-life.”

Laughing at that, Sakuta started pedalling, snaking left and right until he got speed up.

“M-moron, ride straight,” Rio panicked, a rarity for her.

“You’re heavy,” was all Sakuta offered.

“Die.”

Somehow he corrected their course and they caught up with Yuuma.

“You pair are enjoying yourselves,” he said with a laugh as he looked at them.

“I’m not enjoying myself at all,” Rio said embarrassedly, as any normal girl would after having her weight commented on.

Fifteen minutes later, after leaving Honkugenuma Station, they were one station south at Kugenumakaigan Station and reached Kugenuma. It was a corner of the Shonan area facing out into Sagami Bay. The area was a park that faced out onto the beach and had maintained paths down to the san. There were also areas set aside for beach volleyball and skateboarding, though Sakuta had never used those in his life...

Enoshima was visible off to the east, and because of the distance, the Benten bridge looked like a narrow tightrope.

“Hey, Sakuta,” said Yuuma.

“What?”

“The wind’s a bit strong, isn’t it?”

The three of them had lined up with their backs to the sea, Sakuta first, then Rio, then Yuuma, making a wall against the wind, but the candle wouldn’t light.

“Apparently there’s a storm coming in tomorrow night.”

The wind itself was damp.

“Get in closer, Kunimi, use your massive body to block the wind,” Sakuta said.

“You too,” he answered, as they gathered in closer, sandwiching Rio.

“Y-you’re too close,” she protested quietly, but they pretended not to hear her, “I said you’re too close.”

Rio curled up between the two of them.

“Ah, it’s lit!” Yuuma cheered in joy from where he was holding the match, “Futaba, hurry.”

At his urging, Rio put the end of the firework she was holding near the candle’s small flame. It lit perfectly, green sparks spurting out, changing to yellow and then finally pink.

Sakuta and Yuuma both lit their own, creating an island of light around the three of them.

The scent of scorched gunpowder really brought the summer home.

Because of how long it took to get them lit in the first place, there was an odd sense of accomplishment when they finally caught. They then almost competed, lighting firework after firework.

After a while, the wind stopped, and the three of them reached out for sparklers as if it was almost planned, lighting them on three, all of them quietly snapping away as they shed sparks.



“Aren’t you going to ask, Kunimi?” Rio asked, her gaze unwavering from her sparkler.

“Hm?”

“About me?”

“Back when Sakuta called me, obviously I wondered what was going on,” said Yuuma unconcernedly, Rio watching his face from the side, “But then when I saw you crying earlier, I decided it didn’t matter.”

“Forget that...”

“Ah.”

“Oh.”

Sakuta and Yuuma’s sparklers both ran out nearly simultaneously.

“Fuck, we lost!” Said Yuuma, stretching and standing. It wasn’t like they’d really made it a contest, but Sakuta felt the same way, “We should be able to see them from here,” he added, looking towards Enoshima.

“Huh? See what?” Asked Sakuta.

“The Enoshima Fireworks, they’re next week, right?”

Sakuta stood as well and moved next to him. The moderate distance certainly did seem like it would make the fireworks easily visible.

“I said that last year, you know?” Rio said, her sparkler still lit.

“Did you?”

“I did, then you both said ‘I want to seem them up-close’.”

In the end, there had been lots of people, it had hurt their necks, and the sound had been overwhelming.

“Shall we watch them from here this year then?” Asked Yuuma with a carefree smile on his face as he looked back at Rio.

“Don’t you have plans with your cute girlfriend?” Asked Sakuta in place of Rio, who didn’t answer immediately.

“Ah, we’re having a bit of a fight,” he answered with a forced laugh.

“You see?” Sakuta turned back to Rio.

“What about you, Azusagawa, don’t you have plans with Sakurajima-senpai?”

“Her agency has banned us from dating for now.”

“Well, she *is* really famous,” Yuuma laughed at his misfortune.

“I’ve got work that day, but well, I can just get Koga to switch with me.”

“Koga’s plans don’t matter then?” Asked Yuuma with an appalled laugh.

“What about you, Futaba?”

“I don’t really have any plans.”

“It’s decided then,” Yuuma said.

“And as thanks for today, you’ve got to wear a yukata,” added Sakuta.

“Eh?”

“Oh, that’d be nice,” Yuuma said.

At that, Rio shook clearly.

“It’s hard to get them on though,” she complained quietly without really complaining.

“So you need some help to get it on.”

Realising what she’d implied too late, Rio glared at him, approaching him and lightly punching him in the shoulder.

“Say,” Yuuma spoke from where he was still looking towards Enoshima, “Is the sky getting brighter?”

Looking from Mount Fuji to the west towards Enoshima to the east, they saw Yuuma was right, the eastern sky was definitely lightening.

“This is the first time I’ve spent a whole night like this,” said Rio, “what on Earth am I doing?”

“Something stupid, obviously,” Sakuta spoke his mind.

“It definitely is,” Yuuma agreed.

She then let out a sigh before murmuring, "It's such a disappointment."

"She's talking about you, Kunimi."

"Nah, it's definitely about you."

"It's both of you," she said, making the pair exchange uncomprehending glances. Seeing their confused expressions, Rio laughed slightly, "I wish you'd both been girls."

Once more, Sakuta and Yuuma exchanged glances.

If they were girls, there would have been less distance between them, they could have talked about more things, she wouldn't have fallen for Yuuma and they could have stayed friends forever.

That was probably what she wanted to say.

"You need to wear a skirt from tomorrow, Sakuta."

"I've always wanted to try one," Sakuta added immediately to Yuuma's suggestion.

Rio laughed loudly.

"You idiots," she looked happily at both of them, "you really are, you're the worst, but..."

Here, she stopped.

"But?"

"Nothing."

"Seriously, what?"

"I'm not telling you."

"The hell?"

Sakuta and Yuuma both voiced their displeasure, but she wouldn't say, so they stopped asking her. They could imagine what they'd say easily enough as well.

*"You really are, you're the worst, but that's why we're friends."*

They were sure it would be something like that.

“Kunimi,” Sakuta said, flinging a phone towards him without waiting for a response. It was Rio’s phone, still in his care.

“Hm? Woah.” Even with his surprise, he easily caught in one-handed, a question on his face, but when he saw Sakuta arranging Rio at his side with the sea as a background, he made a sound of understanding, standing on her other side.

“W-what?” Asked Rio, uncomprehending.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Yuuma insisted, pointing the lens towards them and opening the camera app, stretching his arm out to the limit to get them all framed.

“What’s made by fermenting milk?”

“Cheese,” Rio answered monotonously. A moment later, the pleasant shutter noise echoed around the beach.

From then until the sun rose, Sakuta and the others just chatted. About if Rio was aiming to be a doctor like her father, about getting aroused by unsociable nurses, about if she wasn’t aiming to be a doctor, about how Yuuma had bad taste in girls, how she had her own good points, and how they were fighting... they just said what they wanted to without hesitance or restraint.

As the sun rose they talked about how it looked great and was emotionally moving, but the bright sun on their tired eyes wasn’t enjoyable, so they left the beach.

Of course, they collected all of the rubbish from the fireworks, putting the cinders in a bottle filled with seawater like skewers they were finished eating.

“Ah, the trains should be running now,” said Sakuta as they walked up to the Katase-Enoshima Station, the red building based on the Palace of the Dragon King. They parted with Yuuma at the ticket gates.

“Thanks then, see you.”

“Yeah,” Yuuma replied as he rode off, soon speeding up and disappearing past the building.

Right up until the end, he hadn’t asked Rio a thing.

“I can get why you fell for him I guess.”

“What brought this on?”

“Kunimi’s just too good a guy.”

“You are too,” Rio said as she passed through the ticket barriers. Sakuta walked after her.

“Don’t lump me in with that bastard.”

“So you get shy too,” laughed Rio without turning around. They boarded the train at the platform amongst the other few passengers. They were mostly youths, university students mainly. They seemed to have been out all night and drifted to the station in the morning like Sakuta and Rio had. About half of them seemed to be exhausted, and they could even hear people sleeping.

The train quietly left the station.

“Azusagawa,” Rio’s voice broke the characteristic quiet of the early-morning train carriage. Her gaze was watching the passing scenery through the window opposite.

“If you’re scared, I can stay today too.”

“That’s fine, I just want to go home and sleep now,” she said while suppressing a yawn.

“I agree there,” Sakuta said, her yawn prompting one of his own, “so?”

“It’s about the other me.”

“Well, I figured.”

“She’ll be worse off than me.”

Sakuta looked sidelong at her, trying to divine her meaning.

“She hates me,” Rio added.

“I see.”

“She hates me, the proof of her wants to be desired by men. I disgust her, and she thinks I’m not her.” That was probably why there were two of them, “But however much she hates me, and is disgusted by me... I’m sure she still knows



that it's still her."

"It sounds awful."

"It is." The other Rio hating this Rio meant that in the end, she was hating herself, there was no word for it other than awful. "So please, look after the other me."

"I will, but."

"But what?"

"In thanks, make me coffee whenever I turn up at the lab."

"Sure. It's not mine, but... I guess it'll be fine?"

Rio didn't hide her unease.

"Who knows, I don't. But when I saw you crying, I just kind of got it."

It might have been his imagination, but that might have been what Rio had really wanted, that's what he thought at least.

"Forget that already, it's really embarrassing..."

Rio hunched in on herself as the train stopped at Kugenumakaigan Station and then left again, arriving at Rio's station, Honkugenuma Station after about a minute.

"Ah, your phone?" Sakuta asked, still having it.

"Keep it, for a while at least."

Judging by her face, she didn't even want to touch it.

"Sure, night then."

"You too," Rio waved, smiling gently in the morning light. Even for Sakuta, who had known her for over a year, that smile made his heart skip a beat.

Rubbing at his sleepy eyes, Sakuta got home at around half-past five. Everyone seemed to be sleeping inside, but as Sakuta was taking his shoes off:

"Welcome back," Rio greeted him.

"Yeah, I'm home..."

“You look tired.”

“Futaba, here,” he handed the phone to her as he went inside, “She probably won’t do it anymore.”

“...I see,” she said, casting her eyes down at the phone. The photo of Sakuta, Rio, and Yuuma had been set as the lock screen.

Rio was looking blankly at the camera in the middle, Yuuma was smiling brightly on the right, and Sakuta was on the opposite side, only half visible. The sea was in the background, with Enoshima and the lightening sky. It was by no means a professional photo, and wasn’t cleanly taken, but was the best they’d taken.

“I’ll tell you everything properly later, but I’m tired now, going to sleep.”

He staggered into the living room and dropped himself to the floor, he didn’t want to move anymore, and couldn’t in fact. As he closed his eyes, he was immediately swallowed into dreams.

That was why he didn’t hear Rio speaking to him, and didn’t notice the sound of the door closing after a few moments.

That evening, when Sakuta woke up, Rio wasn’t in the house.

# Chapter 4 — Wash it all Away on a Stormy Night

1

When Sakuta opened his eyes, it was to find a white cat, Hayate, right in front of them. He had jumped up and was playing around on top of Sakuta. At least he seemed to be growing up well.

Sakuta got up and looked around. He was in a familiar room, his own living room, having been asleep on its floor.

Finally, his brain started working and he remembered coming home that morning. He looked at the clock and saw that it was approaching six o'clock in the evening so he had slept for about twelve hours. Even so, his body was heavy and he still felt sleepy.

Regardless, he realised he still had to prepare dinner and stood up, first taking a shower to wash off the sweat. The cooling shower felt great and by the time he left the bathroom, he was fully awake. As he went back to the living room in his boxers, Kaede came out from her room.

"Good morning, Onii-chan," she greeted him.

"Evening, Kaede."

"Good evening."

"Is Futaba in her room?" He asked, his own room having completely turned into Futaba's for now.

"No, she's not back yet."

"Huh? She went out?"

"Yes, she said she was going shopping right after you got back."

*"Shopping?"*

Sakuta had gotten back at around six that morning, and going shopping that early was bizarre. Most traders would be stocking at that hour. Sakuta opened

his, now practically Rio's, room. It was oddly tidy, and there wasn't a single item of Rio's left, and there were even signs she'd cleaned up.

A cold sweat ran down his just-washed back.

"That idiot," he said to himself, following the instincts from the core of his body and running out of the front door. However, he soon stopped. He had no idea where to go. Besides, he was still only wearing his boxers. It might be the time of the year for business casual, but society in general probably wouldn't allow his outfit. He was about ten years too early for that, he'd have to wait until the advent of dangerous business casual.

Sakuta returned to his room and put on a pair of three-quarter cargo trousers and moved in front of the phone as he put on a T-shirt, dialling his friend's mobile number, Rio's phone number.

No matter how many times it rang, she didn't pick up, and when she thought she did, it was just the voicemail.

"It's me, Azusagawa. Where are you? Are you not coming back? Call me when you hear this, do it," he left a message, even though he thought it was pointless, and put the receiver back down. He then picked it right up again, intending to call the other Rio. However, when he went to dial her number, he realised he didn't know her home phone number. There was the class network back in elementary school, but he hadn't seen anything similar since starting high school, and there hadn't been any real need to know until now.

"Kaede, I'm going out for a bit," he told her.

"Right now?" She asked.

He placed his hand on her head as she looked lonely.

"Sorry."

"N-no, it's not your fault. I'll be fine!"

"Thaw some curry for dinner."

"I will."

"I'll probably be back late, so you don't need to wait up."

“I’ll wait as long as it takes,” she insisted, prompting him to rub her head before leaving.

Sakuta raced through the streets astride his bike, first heading to Fujisawa Station where he was going to switch to a train to go to Honkugenuma Station by Rio’s house before deciding that a single stop would be quicker on the bike so continued pedalling.

The wind against his body was oddly warm, and soaking wet, and having lived this long, Sakuta had a good idea of what that meant, a typhoon was nearby.

He continued pedalling without slowing as he looked up at the sky to see it blanketed by a thick layer of dark clouds. They writhed as if they were living things, flowing northward as they undulated and shifted strangely.

“Come on, don’t.”

The instant he opened his mouth, a large drop of rain fell from the sky, followed shortly by a second and third striking his body. It grew stronger quickly, soon turning torrential, heavy enough that the entire area around him seemed white.

“No way,” he cried out, his T-shirt sticking heavily to him with water.

He thought of heading back, but he’d still be soaked either way.

“This is the worst, fuck!” Sakuta yelled in displeasure, still pedalling desperately away.

By the time he arrived at Rio’s house, he was soaked through to his skin. Bluntly, it felt awful, but this wasn’t the time for complaints.

He touched the button on the intercom. With both of her parents out, he thought it might be meaningless, but Rio answered.

“Azusagawa?” Came her voice from the intercom.

“How could you tell?”

“The camera.”

“Huh, high-tech.”

“They’re not that rare nowadays, come in.”

The gate opened and Sakuta took his bike through. It still had its aura of richness that Sakuta would never get used to, however many times he came. It seemed to reject Sakuta, even scruffier with being soaked.

Sakuta stopped his bike and Rio opened the door, looking out in her cute and fluffy pyjamas.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“Futaba’s gone.”

“Eh?”

“She was there when I got back, then I crashed... when I woke up, she’d completely gone, her things and everything.”

“Just so you know, I don’t think we’ve gone back to one.”

“I figured.”

Somehow he had thought that would be the case, there was no reason for them to.

“Do you have any idea where she would have gone?” He asked.

“...Maybe the school,” Rio answered strongly without much hesitation. She seemed somehow certain of it. “If the other me is intending to disappear from us... I think she’d probably do that, I’d go to the place I was finally not alone at the end.”

“Got it, thanks.”

Then, there was a thunderclap, shaking the air.

“Kya,” Rio screamed in surprise, covering her ears.

“So you make that kind of noise as well.”

“I-it was just so sudde-kya!” In the middle of her excuse, the sky lit up again, soon followed by the sound from nearby.

Sakuta looked at her for a moment.

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

“If you get scared on your own, call Kunimi.”

“I won’t call him.”

“You could go ‘I’m scaaaared’ and cling to him though.”

“I wouldn’t say something like that.”

“If you manage to get him to come on to you, he’ll take responsibility.”

“I don’t want to get together like that.”

“Well, do your best normally then,” Sakuta answered and swung his leg back over his bike.

“I’ll come too.”

“You stay here. Ah, tell me your home number too.”

Rio went back inside and then came out with a piece of paper which she gave him.

“I’ll call if I find anything. Also...”

“She might come here,” Rio preempted him. Her gaze was nervous and she was probably thinking of the doppelgänger legend where you would die if you encountered your own. There were actually two Rios right now, so that couldn’t be ignored. No one knew what would happen if they met, and Rio’s hypothesis also included that.

“If she does, talk to her calmly.”

“I intend to, but...”

He knew what she wanted to say, they didn’t know how the other one would react, and they couldn’t discount some suspicious developments being the reason she left. If the two couldn’t become one again, only one of them could live as ‘Futaba Rio’. They had to consider the possibility of both of them vying for the same place.

As he considered that absolute worst case, Sakuta once again rode off, needing to search for Rio as quickly as possible.

He had thought to return to Fujisawa Station and ride the Enoden to school, but he soon rejected that idea. He was already dripping wet, so would cause issues riding the train one way or another, and it would definitely get in the

way.

The wind was his next concern, it was fairly strong, possibly gale-force, and that coupled with the heavy rain might interrupt the train service, and force it to halt.

So Sakuta left Rio's house and headed towards Enoshima. He took route 134 along the coast. Taking that road, it was about two kilometres to Shichirigahama.

The wind from the sea was strong and the sea looked pitch black, towering waves assailing the usually peaceful beach.

Squinting through the driving rain and wind, Sakuta pedalled onwards past Enoshima. He couldn't even see the hanging lanterns that would usually be shining at this time of year, they'd probably been taken down in preparation for the storm.

The wind beat against his body repeatedly, nearly knocking him over on several occasions. The road saw a lot of traffic, there were dangerous spots and the cars passing him drenched him in spray.

"Ah, dammit, this is so annoying!" He complained to no-one, the rain drowning out his voice. "It really is!"

He still didn't stop yelling though, and he didn't slow down. He stood on his pedals, Shichirigahama in sight, and sped up even further.

"Dammit, Futaba!"

Shichirigahama was a familiar sight to him, but looked completely different. The waves were favoured by surfers from the beginning, but they seemed like they would swallow you at a single glance now. Turning his back on them, Sakuta put on a final burst of effort towards the now-visible school.

"Hahh... Ah, I'm gonna throw up, I'm gonna," he said, swaying as he stopped at the gate.

He climbed over the shut gate and entered the school premises.

There wasn't a sign of anyone. There were the Obon holidays from the thirteenth to the sixteenth of August, so students couldn't come to school.



There might have been some teachers, but Sakuta couldn't see any signs of them, and of course, the entrance was closed.

"If she's not here *now*

, I'm gonna cry," he complained as he went around the school to the outside of the physics lab.

The other Rio had recently told him that the window lock was broken on the second one from the inside.

"This one," he said, putting his hand on the glass and easily slid it to the side.

He put his foot on the window frame and entered the room.

"Futaba, you here?"

There was no reply.

"You not here?" He asked.

Of course, there was no reply.

He took his shoes and socks off, moving over to the sink and taking his shirt off before wringing it out. A ridiculous amount of water poured out. Then he did his trousers, and because no one was there, his boxers as well, the amount of water making it seem like he'd practically upended a bucket.

He didn't want to hang around school in the nude, so pulled on his still unpleasantly-wet clothes. It felt awful, but he had to bear with it. The bigger problem was that Rio wasn't in the lab. When the other Rio had suggested the school, Sakuta had assumed that this was where she meant.

However, she wasn't here, maybe she wasn't even at the school.

When he thought that, Sakuta spotted a familiar thing on the table by the board, a smartphone. When he picked it up and used it, he soon found that it was Rio's.

She had definitely been here, so he'd have to make that she wasn't still.

Trying to shake off his unease, Sakuta stepped out into the corridor to search for her, walking off randomly. For now, he decided to go to the second-year classrooms, maybe she'd be in her own classroom.

As he headed towards the stairs, Sakuta passed by the first year classrooms. All of the year classrooms were on separate floors, the first-years on the first floor, the second-years on the second, and the third-years on the third.

Class 1-1's door was half open.

Sakuta paused.

That was the classroom he had had last year, with Rio and Yuuma.

He opened the door fully and entered.

The sound startled the person inside.

Rio was sitting in the furthest seat on the window side, holding her knees as she sat, staring wide-eyed at Sakuta as he entered the room.

"Azusagawa, why..."

"Man that was a pain," Sakuta said as he slumped into a seat a fair distance away from Rio, right in front of the teacher's desk. This was where he had sat in the third term last year, the board was easily seen from there.

Rio's gaze stabbed into his back, letting him keenly feel how guarded she was. He pretended not to notice and opened his mouth.

"I forgot to ask you something yesterday... actually, I guess that'd be this morning."

"...What?"

"Want to come to the fireworks next week?"

"Eh?" Asked Rio in plain surprise, that probably having been the last thing she expected to hear.

"The ones at Enoshima, we went last year, right?"

"That's not what I meant," she said, somewhat angrily, annoyed at what he was doing.

"Kunimi's coming too," he told her.

Rio was silent for several moments, so Sakuta continued.

"We're going to watch them from Kugenumakaigan like you said last year."

“I...”

“You’ll come too, right?”

“...I won’t.”

“Already have plans?”

“I’m going to disappear from here,” she said, her emotions suppressed from her voice, “I’m going to disappear away from you, and from this town.”

Her voice was quiet and cold.

“What’s that supposed to be?” He returned lightly, ignoring the mood.

“This world doesn’t need two Futaba Rios.”

That was what the other Rio had said. They were the same person so they said the same things, that obvious thing somehow put Sakuta at ease, they really were both Rio.

“If I’m not here, that will solve everything.”

“Will it?” He asked.

“The other me has stopped with those indecent photos.”

“Yeah, she said she would.”

“And I’m sure she’s living in that big, empty house as Futaba Rio, right?”

“Right.”

“She comes to school every day and does the club activities properly as well.”

“Well, she sometimes goes in to watch Kunimi practise.”

“She’s living perfectly well as Futaba Rio,” she said quietly, removing any objections and narrowing down her own existence. She had completely closed her heart off and was trying to vanish. What on Earth must that feel like, he wondered.

“The first-year basketballers think she’s cute as well.”

“Then she’s being an even better ‘Futaba Rio’ than I am,” she said, another piece fitting in, a piece of despair... “She’s already part of this world, living happily as ‘Futaba Rio’.”

The puzzle was nearly complete. Actually, it was *already* complete, all that was left...

“If I vanished, it would solve everything.”

Was to throw away the left-over pieces.

“That’s definitely wrong as a solution,” answered Sakuta with no hesitation, just the same as always...

“It’s not wrong at all, it’s a completely correct answer.”

“It’s utterly wrong, right from the start.”

“Then why!?” Rio stood with a clatter, “Why did you show me that picture!?”

Sakuta’s eyes dropped to the phone in his hand, with the background of him, Rio, and Yuuma. It would be cliché, but there was something extra in the picture that you couldn’t see. He was sure that if you put the word ‘friendship’ into a thing, it would be this picture.

“There’s nowhere for me to go anymore!” Rio cried out in a shaking voice, “What else would I think when you showed me a picture like that!?”

He heard a sniffle from behind him.

“Obviously you don’t need me anymore... You, Kunimi, you both have that me!” That was why he thought she was crying, crying right from the bottom of her heart, ready to lose everything... “You’re so insensitive!!”

Rio’s words were offensive and piercing, and in this moment, she hated him, and feeling that was the only thing that hurt him about this.

“You moron,” Even so, he laughed those feelings off, “Why are you saying that now, Futaba?”

“Because...”

“I already know I’m insensitive, you’ve told me often enough.”

“...That’s what I mean! Being able to say stuff like that in this kind of situation! That’s why-!” Rio tried to continue, but Sakuta just calmly spoke over her.

“So yeah, half six at Kugenumakaigan Station on the nineteenth.”

He was speaking in the same tone he always used when they chatted in the lab, in the same tone as he used when teasing her about her feelings towards Kunimi.

Rio was completely lost for words.

“That’s all I had to say,” he spoke, putting the phone in his pocket and standing up. Still looking at the board and not turning around to Rio at all.

The rest was up to Rio. If she wouldn’t grab the offered hand, there was nothing more Sakuta could do. You couldn’t save someone from despair on your own, he wasn’t so prideful to think he could.

There was no reason for him to stay here, so he went to walk away.

It was at that moment that his vision blurred and his body swayed. When he realised it was dizziness, he was already falling unconscious.

“Azusagawa!?” He heard Rio’s strained voice from far, far away.

His vision was completely black, and he couldn’t see anything. For a moment he thought he could, but it was just the pattern of the floor tiles.

*They might be dirty*

, he thought before finally falling completely unconscious.

2

His body was being shaken, something was clattering underneath him and he could feel a sway to the left and right.

When he noticed that, he also realised someone was speaking to him.

He slowly tried opening his eyes.

An unfamiliar ceiling greeted him, but it was a ceiling he had seen once before. He also remembered the sound of the sirens. The other things he could hear were the rain pounding against the windows and the regular sweep of the wipers.

“Are you awake?” Asked a man in his thirties, peering at Sakuta’s face, wearing a paramedic uniform.

“Azusagawa,” Rio said worriedly from next to him.

“Ah, did I collapse?” He asked, remembering the awful dizziness. Everything was black after then, and he only realised now.

“It looks like you were dehydrated. The fainting appears to be a symptom of light heatstroke,” said the paramedic, using words you often heard on the news at this time of year. Sakuta had never thought that would happen to him. “Does anything hurt? You may have bumped yourself as you fell.”

He considered himself, nothing really hurt.

“Nothing hurts, no.”

“She says you may have hit your head, so when we arrive at the hospital, I think you’ll be examined.”

“Right,” Sakuta answered in agreement, thinking feigning toughness after collapsing was foolish himself.

After ten minutes, they arrived at the hospital and Sakuta was taken to a fairly normal examination room. He had somewhat expected to be taken in to an emergency care room like you saw on medical dramas, but apparently not.

A doctor in his late twenties examined him.

“Just in case, we’ll take a CT scan,” he said, and they moved to another floor. Just as the doctor had said, Sakuta’s head was put in the big machine and a scan was taken before they returned to the initial examination room.

“We’ll put you on an IV, just in case.”

It was a disquieting way to put it, but he’d just have to trust the doctor. He was put in a bed and a needle put in his arm and an IV drip put at the side of the bed and connected to Sakuta by a tube.

“I’ll come when it’s finished,” said the doctor before hurrying off. Maybe there was someone more urgent he had to see.

Sakuta quietly watched the IV as it dripped. Then became comfortable and drifted off to sleep.

When Sakuta woke up, it was because of a discomfort in his cheek. It was a

strangely stiff feeling, like someone had been pinching his cheek.

Overcoming the languidness filling him, Sakuta slowly opened his eyes.

“Morning,” came the voice of a woman looking unhappily down at him. It was her fingers that were pinching his cheek.

For now, he just looked steadily at her.

“What are you so fascinated for?” She asked.

“My amazingly beautiful senior is right there, couldn’t help it.”

“I suppose you’re fine then, judging by that.”

Sakuta heaved himself up. There was no dizziness accompanying the motion, and the IV bag was completely empty and had been disconnected at some point, replaced by a patch of gauze on his arm.

“So, Mai-san... what’s this punishment for?”

Mai’s fingers still hadn’t left his cheek.

“It’s a punishment for the older brother who made Kaede-chan worry before sleeping there happily.”

“I see, understandable,” he said in agreement, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s Kaede-chan you should apologise to, go phone her now.”

“Right,” he answered, about to ask to borrow Mai’s phone, but then worried about whether he should use it in a hospital and decided not to. A hospital should have plenty of payphones, “Oh yeah, how come you’re here?”

“Futaba-san called me.”

He had called Rio from Mai’s phone before, so her number was in the call history he guessed.

“But is it alright to come here?” He asked, thinking of her manager saying they shouldn’t meet for a while. He hadn’t heard anything about that being rescinded.

In this examination room, they weren’t in public view, but the corridor connected to other rooms and the doctors and nurses going backwards and

forth had all noticed Mai. A white-coated man earlier had made a noise of surprise, and the nurse that had come to check his chart had looked twice. There were also younger doctors that had taken pointless trips past to look at her.

“Before all that, isn’t there something you should be saying to your girlfriend after worrying her?”

She asked unhappily as she stood from her stool.

“I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Do it over.”

“Ehh.”

“Do it over,” she repeated, more and more unhappily. This would just continue until he told her what she wanted to hear, and if he couldn’t get there quickly, she’d start treading on his foot.

“I don’t want you not to be able to work because of this.”

“You know,” she said sulkily as he still wouldn’t say what she wanted, “I do like work, it’s fun, and I want to keep doing it, but.”

She finished with a clear division, her eyes seeming to urge him. He more or less got what she wanted to say, he did, but he wanted to hear her say it if he could.

“But?” He asked with an innocent expression.

“You already know, right?”

“No, not at all.”

Mai pouted slightly, but opened her mouth in surrender.

“Work is important, but... I want to look after you if you get a cold, I want to have dates on my days off,” she looked sulky, her face blaming Sakuta for making her say it, “I’m only working again because of you, it’s pointless if it means I can’t see you.”

That whole thing was so destructive, the words cute or happy didn’t do it justice.



“Mai-san!” He exclaimed.

“W-what?”

“Can I hug you?”

“Why?” She asked guardedly, leaning back.

“I want to show you how happy I am.”

She paused to think for a moment, and then said with a smile, playing tough,  
“Three seconds.”

“Ehh, I need at least a minute.”

“If you hugged me for that long, I’d get pregnan-kya!”

As she spoke, Sakuta hugged her tightly, putting both arms around her back. Her body was soft and warm, and she smelt nice.

She put both hands on his chest as she shrunk in his arms.

“That’s three seconds.”

“Give me an extension.”

“You already have things you need to do.” She said.

He had to phone Kaede and thank Rio for calling the ambulance and riding with him to the hospital.

“When I’m done, can we carry on?”

“It’s already been more than ten seconds, so no.”

“Ehhh.”

“It’s your fault for not keeping your promise,” she said, making him immediately move away.

“Too late,” she added, poking him in the forehead.

He pleaded desperately with his eyes.

“Looking at me like a dead fish won’t help.”

“I’m looking at you like an abandoned puppy.”

“Hurry up and go, I’ll listen when the doctor comes back for you.”

“Please do,” he said, leaving her in the room and heading out into the corridor, “First I need to phone Kaede.”

The nostalgic green phones were next to the closed and unlit shop, to the side of four vending machines.

He put in a ten yen coin and dialled his home number, the answering machine picking up the call.

“Kaede, it’s me, are you still up?”

“Onii-chan!?” Kaede’s voice came from the phone after a few seconds.

“Yeah, it’s your Onii-chan.”

“Thank goodness, you’re still alive...”

“Don’t go killing me off. There’s still some things to do here, so I’ll be a little longer before I’m back,” he said, looking at the clock on the wall and seeing it was ten PM, He’d prefer to return home today, “You don’t need to wait up.”

“I’ll wait,” she insisted.

“I see, well, don’t push yourself,” he said, sure she wouldn’t listen even as he said it, so he carried on, stopping her from answering, “Kaede.”

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“I’m your little sister, of course I worry about you!”

“Well, thank you for always being my sister then.”

“R-right! I’ll keep doing my best!”

“Later then,” he said, putting the receiver down.

As he did so, he suddenly noticed how quiet it was, and then a chime of a lift arriving broke that silence from just past the vending machines.

The doors opened and a girl stepped out.

“Ah,” said Sakuta, because he knew the girl’s face.

“Eh?” She was still looking at Sakuta in surprise. The girl that had appeared in pyjamas and slippers... was Makinohara Shouko. “U-um... Why are you here?”

She asked, casting her gaze about as she tried to maintain herself, with that particular expression you have when you're seen somewhere you don't want to be.

"An ambulance brought me here after I collapsed from heatstroke."

"A-are you okay?"

"The symptoms were light, and they gave me an IV, so I'm even better than normal."

"You need to keep yourself hydrated," she said, finally looking at him properly and speaking to him as an older sister would, "and you need enough salts too."

"Yeah, guess so."

The conversation paused for a moment.

"Uhhh, why are you here, Makinohara-san?" He asked, unable to avoid the question after an encounter like this. Not asking would look unnatural, and Sakuta was honestly concerned.

"I caught a cold," she answered flatly.

"Let's see," he said, approaching her and putting his hand on her forehead, "doesn't look like you've got a fever."

"R-right."

"Your voice is the same as normal too, no cough?"

She was silent.

"Doesn't look like your nose is running either," he said, cutting off her avenues of escape one by one.

"I'm sorry, I lied," she admitted easily.

He'd known that from the beginning. She was in her pyjamas and slippers, and the hospital wasn't open to out-patients this late. If she wasn't brought in by an ambulance like Sakuta, then there was only one possibility left, she was an in-patient.

"...What's wrong?" He asked, not sure whether to ask, but when he saw her forlorn expression, he started to talk.

Shouko opened her mouth, but then immediately closed it again.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, don’t force yourself to.”

“No, I think I should tell you,” she said, looking up at him with a resolute gaze.

They sat on a bench by the vending machines and Shouko told him about her illness in a slow, calm voice.

He had never heard the name before, and had no idea how to write it, but he was able to understand it was some kind of heart disease.

At any rate, it was a serious disease and Shouko’s condition was worsening as she grew. She told him that there were several methods for prolonging her life, but the only way to properly treat it was a transplant. However, there were far fewer child organ donors than adults, and they had apparently not been able to find one. Because finding one would mean that someone else had met with misfortune, Shouko had a complex expression as she talked about it.

She wanted a donor to appear, but at the same time, felt like that meant she wanted someone else to suffer so it pained her.

“What happens if they can’t find a donor?” Sakuta asked.

“When they realised what illness it was, the doctors said it might be difficult for me to graduate middle school.”

Shouko spoke relatively plainly about her own final moments, and her expression even seemed relieved, which Sakuta didn’t understand at all.

However, there was something he did understand.

“So that’s what it was.”

“Sakuta-san?”

“I finally got it.”

“Got what?”

“Remember when we were talking about Hayate? You said that if you told your parents ‘I want to get a cat’, that they’d definitely let you.”

Without a donor, Shouko might only live to be fourteen or fifteen. There was no way her parents would turn a deaf ear on her words in that case, they’d

naturally try and do everything for her that they could. If Shouko said she wanted something, then they'd do their best to buy it for her, if she said she wanted to do something, they'd do their best to make sure she could.

"They're both very kind to me," she said.

Sakuta just waited.

"They're so kind... If I ask for something, they just say 'sure', no matter what it is. It makes me really happy, but it's just as painful."

"Yeah," Sakuta returned, just to let her know he was listening without interrupting her too much, he couldn't say that he understood their feelings.

"After she says 'sure', she'll definitely apologise when I'm not there... for giving birth to me with this body..."

"Right..."

"So... I still haven't talked about Hayate," she said, her expression shadowed. Sakuta noticed it, and realised what was causing it, so he wordlessly pinched her cheek.

"W-what was that for?" She asked panickily at his unexpected action.

"Punishment for blaming your mother," he answered.

"Eh?"

"If you ask for something with such a gloomy face, of course your mother would feel sorry."

"...But-"

Before she could say anything, Sakuta pulled at her other cheek as well.

"S-Shakuta-shan!?"

That was probably supposed to be 'Sakuta-san', he guessed.

"Makinohara-san, as long as you feel sorry for being ill, that won't change. I'm sure your parents have noticed those feelings of guilt, don't you think harbouring those feelings of sorrow towards you is the most painful for them? Your mother feels sorry for giving birth to your body like that."

“...That might be true,” she continued in slight agreement and a quiet voice,  
“But what should I-”

“Makinohara-san, what do you think of your parents? You don’t want them to feel sad and apologetic, do you?”

“I love them both, I adore them,” she answered without hesitation, doubtlessly honestly.

“And have you told them that?”

“...I haven’t.”

“Rather than being told ‘I’m sorry’, it makes me happier to hear ‘I love you’. Something like ‘I adore you’ would put me on cloud nine.”

“Ah...” She said, finally seeming to understand what Sakuta wanted to say.

“Someone once told me that ‘thank you’, ‘you fought hard’, and ‘I love you’ were her three great lovable phrases.”

“I...”

Sakuta let go and she stood up.

A moment later, the lift arrived, a married couple in their late-thirties stepping out. He could tell from their reaction on seeing Shouko. They had come to look for her when she hadn’t returned.

“Mother, Father,” she said, trotting quickly over to them.

“Ah, Shouko, don’t ru-” Shouko buried herself in her mother’s chest as she worried over her, “Oh my, what’s wrong?”

She was taken aback, but still gently hugged her back.

“Mother, Father, thank you for everything.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

Her parents exchanged looks.

“I love you both, I utterly adore you.”

“We both adore you too,” answered her father, softly stroking her head.

“That’s right,” answered her mother.

“I’m glad that you’re my parents,” she said, looking up at them from where she was still hugging her mother, a smile in full bloom on her face.

“Shouko...” Her mother said before choking up, tears glistening in her eyes. Her father looked away slightly as well, wiping tears from his own face. A warm atmosphere enveloped them, full of the caring of a family between each other.

“I... have a request,” she said.

“What is it, Shouko?”

“I want to get a cat,” she answered, still with her bright smile. They both accepted that with a gentle expression.

“That sounds good, let’s do it.”

“Azusagawa,” came a voice from behind him as he watched Shouko leave again, hand-in-hand with her parents. It was Rio, possibly having been there for a while, “Should you be on your feet already?”

“Even if I collapse again, I’m already in the hospital, so it’s fine.”

“You’re a troublesome patient aren’t you?” Rio asked, a sigh mixed in with wry amusement.

“I caused you trouble too, sorry.”

“That was just cheating,” she scolded him, her eyes unhappy, “I couldn’t just leave you there.”

“It was worth it then,” Sakuta said, sitting on the bench, Rio doing likewise, with two people’s worth of space between them. “Thanks for calling Mai-san.”

“You’d better be thankful.”

“That’s why I said thanks.”

“Not to me, to Sakurajima-senpai.”

“...Was she really worried?”

She hadn’t shown even a hint of it when they were talking earlier, but she had rushed over here for him, so she must have been more worried than he thought.

“She was holding your hand the entire time since she got here.”

“Did you get a picture?” He asked.

“Of course I didn’t.”

“Uwahh, I really wanted to see that.”

“You really are an idiot,” she said with an astounded laugh. That dry sound echoed around the corridor.

They stopped talking, the quiet air of the late-night hospital seeming to increase, the quiet hum of the vending machines filling the silence.

Rio looked at her stretched out toes, seeming to search for the next thing to say...

“Azusagawa, I-”

“If you’re going to say something like ‘I’m not necessary anymore’, ‘everything would be fine if I wasn’t here’, or ‘but I’m really scared and don’t know what to do’... then don’t bother.”

Rio’s utter silence was enough to let him know he was completely right.

“You can hate yourself if you want,” he said, his voice filling the quiet corridor.

There was another long pause before he added, “I just think ‘well, that’s how it is’ as I live.”

“That’s just like you,” she said with a small laugh, “isn’t this where you say ‘you can come to like yourself a bit at a time,’ or ‘you have lots of good points’?”

“That kind of optimism is exhausting. People that love themselves are annoying.”

Forcing yourself wouldn’t make you love something you hated, trying to do so would just cause friction and pressure, making it worse. If that would just hurt yourself, giving up preemptively was one method. Sakuta had learnt that doing so could save you two years ago with Kaede; fighting wasn’t everything, and that was fine.



“You’re the worst, Azusagawa. You are, but... that kind of helps.” Rio’s face relaxed like some demon had been driven out, “It really does help.”

If they were kept taut, a thread of emotion would eventually snap. You should relax every so often and let them have some slack. Things would be much better, and that slack could change how you saw your surroundings, like with Rio now...

Rio needed that slight latitude with what she had stashed away inside herself, just a little bit of relaxing.

Those were Sakuta’s thoughts as he watched Rio’s slack face from the side.

“Say, Azusagawa,” Rio said hesitantly after a while of silence.

“Hm?”

“...The fireworks.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I come too?”

“No.”

Rio fell silent again.

“Not if you’re asking like that.”

A sigh of consideration left her mouth, but all she needed was a few seconds.

“I-I want to go see the fireworks as well,” she said, unusually hurriedly for her, having trouble showing her honest emotions with how unused to doing so she was.

“You’re telling the wrong person,” he said, flipping his remaining ten yen coin. The coin traced out a gentle parabola before being caught two-handed by Rio, her eyes naturally going towards the phones.

She stood up alone and walked over to the phone. She lifted the receiver and put the coin in, dialling a number. Sakuta listened from behind.

He could hear Rio’s nervous breaths. He could tell the phone was immediately answered as she took a slow breath in.

“It’s me... Yeah, I met Azusagawa. Also, um... I have a request.”

She stopped talking for a moment and took another long breath, then continued with feeling, “I want to go to see the fireworks too.”

Nothing followed that. Her breathing itself seemed to have vanished. Then he heard a clatter.

He turned around to look.

He saw a completely ordinary payphone, the receiver swinging from it. He looked to the right and left, but there was no one there, just the long corridor. As far as he could see, there was no one else there.

Standing, Sakuta picked up the receiver and spoke somewhat playfully, “Hellooo.”

“Go back to the examination room, Sakurajima-senpai is waiting for you, isn’t she?” Were the words that answered him.

“I’ll finally be able to play around with Mai-san.”

“I didn’t ask about that.”

“You should, just a little.”

“More importantly, the fireworks?” Rio forcibly changed the topic. “Don’t be late, Azusagawa.”

“You can be a little late though, Futaba. It takes a while to put a yukata on.”

“Do I really have to wear one?”

“There’s no point in going to the fireworks if there’s no girls in yukata.”

“I see... then I guess I have to promise,” she said, her voice somewhat cheery.

# Epilogue — Summer Memories, Remaining after the Fireworks

It was the nineteenth of August, the day of the evening fireworks festival at Enoshima. Sakuta arrived at the meeting place, Kugenumakaigan Station, and found Yuuma already waiting there.

“Hey.”

“Yo.”

They greeted each other.

Yuuma was clad in a yukata. Sakuta too was wearing a yukata too, both of them having been coerced by Rio saying that it would be embarrassing if she was the only one wearing one.

Sakuta’s was all-together reasonable, at eight-thousand yen. While he was at it he had bought Kaede one as well, and that had cost more so he would have to work more shifts for a while.

“Oh yeah, Koga-san really did switch shifts with you then,” said Yuuma, knowing that Sakuta had originally been scheduled to have a shift today.

“I’ll have to treat her to some parfait though,” he answered, deciding to tell her that they were eight-hundred Calories at the time.

“You’ve got a good friendship.”

While they were talking, a train came in to the platform from down the rails. The time for their scheduled meeting had already passed.

There were several passengers also wearing Yukata amongst the crowds coming from the ticket gates. Sakuta then spotted a familiar face bringing up the rear.

“Hey, Futaba!” Yuuma waved to tell her where they were.

She met their eyes and then looked right back down again. Even as far away as she was, they could see she’d gone red to her ears.

Rio approached with small steps, her eyes still downcast.

Her yukata was a plain yellow with a madder-red flower pattern. The sash was a soft yellow and cutely pulled the entire outfit together. She had her hair up, but was wearing her glasses, the navy-blue pouch in her hand tying the hues together.

“Futaba, you went back to glasses,” Yuma commented.

“D-does it look weird?” She asked, touching her finger to the frame and worrying about them.

“They go with your yukata, right, Sakuta?”

“It’s kinda sexy, right, Kunimi?”

“Well, you’re right there.”

“This is why I don’t like them,” Rio said disgustedly, but not as displeased as she’d have them believe.

They took a slow, ten-minute walk from the station and arrived on the beach just as the first fireworks were launched.

A beautiful flower bloomed in the sky, accompanied by a loud sound. As that vanished, the next firework light up the skies above Enoshima with vivid colours.

There were fireworks which arced over like the branches of a willow, fireworks that exploded into countless rings on top of each other, and as soon as each vanished, the next shone in its place...

Sakuta, Rio, and Yuuma all watched the fireworks in the skies, barely exchanging a word.

As the finale approached, a large spherical firework dyed the sky. Lighting the sea, Enoshima itself, and the Benten bridge.

The series of fireworks were impressive, and the sound passed through the sky as tremors.

“Kunimi,” Rio said quietly, her voice mixing with the sound.

“Hm?”

Rio's voice was then drowned out by the sound of the fireworks.

"What?" He asked, apparently, Yuuma couldn't hear her either, so Rio moved next to his ear and spoke again.

She cupped both of her hands around her mouth and stretched up, whispering something into his ear. It was a short sentence, and Rio moved away in the time it took a set of fireworks to go off and fade away.

Rio immediately looked down and chewed at her lips in embarrassment. Her face was red, and clearly not from the light given off by the fireworks.

"Futaba, I-" Kunimi started, only to be interrupted by Rio.

"You don't need to give me a reply, I already know."

"...I see."

"If you said anything, I think I'd cry," she admitted.

"Sakuta can lend you his sleeve if you do."

"You can blow your nose if you want to," said Sakuta.

"Morons," she said, looking at Sakuta and laughing, then looking at Yuuma and doing the same. She then grabbed Sakuta's arm in her right hand and Yuuma's in her left and pulled them tightly to herself as she looked up at the fireworks.

Both of them let out simultaneous noises of surprise at her unexpected action.

"I'm sure I'm the only one," she said.

"Hm?"

"The only one that can watch the fireworks between you two."

There were tears gathering in the corner of her eyes, but she was smiling, so Sakuta didn't say a word and returned his gaze to the sky, Yuuma doing the same.

A large flower burst into being in the night sky over Enoshima, the light burning itself into their eyes, as a memory that would never fade... as a memory the three would one day look back on fondly as their second summer at high

school...



Then ten or so days after that that remained of the summer holidays passed by peacefully.

The dating ban was still in effect, so Sakuta couldn't go out with Mai, and the amount of work she had meant that they couldn't meet anyway.

With nothing else to do, Sakuta buried himself in his own work, sometimes going to school and visiting the physics lab to chat with Rio. She had said he was getting in the way of her club activities and not to come, but he just ignored that.

The summer holiday, which should have been long, soon ended like this. It was the thirty-first of August, and Shouko came to visit with her parents that morning. Shouko's condition had improved so she was discharged two days prior, and they had come to collect Hayate.

Nasuno saw them to the entrance and gave a lonely meow. Kaede was much the same as she peeked out from the living room, but still waved and gave a final farewell.

This was a good thing, so they had to be happy.

As they left, Sakuta saw them down to the bottom of the building.

"Um, Sakuta-san?" Shouko spoke somewhat nervously.

"What?"

"U-uhmm..." Their eyes met, and Shouko looked away, which was rather unlike her. She looked down slightly and her cheeks grew slightly red. "Could I come over again sometime?"

Regardless of her embarrassment, she still looked up at Sakuta and asked straightforwardly.

"Sure, you can bring Hayate too, Kaede and Nasuno will be happy too."

"And you?"

"Hm?"

"Will you be happy too?"



Sakuta gave no answer.

“Sorry, I asked something weird...”

Sakuta put his hand on to her head as she shrunk in on herself and went red.

“Come again,” he said.

“I will!” She answered energetically as she looked up, even as embarrassed as she was. She then smiled and waved and left with her parents.

“Well, it’s fine,” said Sakuta to himself as he thought on how he still didn’t know about the Shouko he met two years ago, but still watched her as she left happily.

The next day was the first of September, and the start of the long-dreaded second school term.

The summer heat was awful, but Sakuta headed to school regardless. He would be able to see Mai there, so that had become his driving force.

Yuuma and Rio were both on the Enoden Fujisawa platform. It was rare for them to all be there at the same time.

“Hey.”

“Yo.”

“Morning.”

They all greeted. Rio had her glasses on and her hair up, giving an intellectual, adult image, and seeming slightly refined.

“What are you staring at?” She asked to stop him, but she had probably realised why, so he decided not to mention it.

“Did you do your homework?” He asked instead.

“That’s just like you to ask when the holidays are already over.”

As they talked, the retro-styled train pulled into the station, and Sakuta enjoyed the nostalgic trip into school as the second term started.

Rio boarded by the back door, Sakuta and Yuuma following her. As they did, Sakuta felt a gaze on him from Yuuma’s girlfriend at the next door. Their eyes

met and she turned away immediately.

“You still fighting?” Asked Sakuta.

“It’s a cold war,” Yuuma answered, a troubled expression on his face.

“You go that way then,” said Rio, using her small body to push Yuuma’s larger one.

“O-oi, Futaba?”

“You haven’t given us a reason, so it’s because of one of us, right?”

“Ahh, well,” Yuuma said, not replying immediately but looking chagrined. Sakuta realised as well.

“What happened?” He asked.

“Well, she sort of... deleted you from my contacts.”

“Me and Futaba?”

“Nah, just you.”

“That bitch.”

“You should hurry up and make up,” said Rio, despite her own lack of involvement.

“But, you know.”

“If you stay like that, my resolve will weaken,” she warned him.

“Man, I can’t stand against that,” Yuuma replied, seeming to make up his mind and leaving from the door, getting on at the next one before the train left and moving next to Saki and started talking to Saki. Saki seemed somewhat confused, but after a while smiled happily, looking relieved.

Rio didn’t seem to want to see their happy conversation and used Sakuta as a wall as she leaned against the door to hide herself.

“You could have just let it be,” Sakuta told her.

“This is fine. If we became boyfriend and girlfriend, that only lasts until we break up.”

Sakuta waited for her to continue.

“I want something that lasts longer.”

“Wow, you’re an awful loser.”

“Shut it,” she said, pouting childishly. It was the first time Sakuta had seen such an expression from her. It would probably take her a while longer to sort out her feelings, but this was fine for now, because that was how she felt...

The short four-carriage train trundled slowly off today as well.

The opening ceremony attended by all of the roughly thousand students at the school spoke of the heat itself with the sheer number of students carrying fans.

Even the headmaster’s greeting was accompanied by the fluttering of the tanned students fanning themselves. The teachers didn’t stop them either, someone collapsing because of heatstroke would be an issue.

Sakuta’s gaze wandered as the head’s speech entered its fifth minute with no sign of stopping, focusing on the third-years, where Mai’s class was.

However, he couldn’t spot Mai at all.

Yesterday evening had seen a call from her where she had said they would be able to see each other today so he had been looking forward to it, but she didn’t seem to have arrived yet.

When the opening address finished, each class had homeroom. Sakuta’s teacher started with, “Well, just ease in.”, which Sakuta didn’t really get. It was probably just to match with the lack of motivation the students would have just after the holiday.

Sakuta picked up his bag and left the classroom, heading up to the third floor, the third-year’s floor.

He looked in on the class that was still going through homeroom.

Mai definitely wasn’t there, her seat was open and her bag wasn’t there, so she wasn’t at school.

Sakuta went down to the first floor to use the payphones to check, moving to the office in a corner of the school.

Sakuta put a ten yen coin into the phone that was probably only used by him and dialled the number.

It didn't connect, and the voicemail answered it after ten rings.

"Uh, it's Sakuta. I called because it didn't look like you're at school, I'm going to go home for now." Sakuta left a message and put the phone down, letting out a breath.

Having been sure he could see her today, his disappointment was huge.

"Well, I can get just as big a reward in return," he told himself, thinking optimistically as he headed home.

He rode the train from Shichirigahama Station for about fifteen minutes and alighted at Fujisawa station before walking for about ten minutes and arriving outside his building.

He stopped in front of the building and looked up at the opposite one, where Mai lived.

As he worried about whether he should call her on the intercom, the auto-locking doors opened and someone walked out.

It was Mai.

Sakuta met her eyes and she blinked twice, but she looked away unconcernedly and went to walk past.

"Mai-san?" He called, putting a hand on her shoulder.

When he did, she shook off his hand and whirled around to look at him guardedly as she observed him.

"Eh, what?" He asked, with a disquiet within him at this strangeness. This was definitely Mai, but she seemed like a different person.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"Huh?" He answered, not realised what she had asked at first.

"I asked who are you?" She said bluntly. Not at all like her usual relaxed demeanour. Her gaze was quizzical and didn't hide her distrust. She really did seem like a different person.

They'd only just dealt with Rio's incident, had another doppelgänger appeared?

"As you are aware, I am Azusagawa Sakuta, in a pure and loving relationship with your good self, Mai-san," he said, his voice full of sarcasm.

"Huh? There's no way a dead-eyed guy like you would be Onee-chan's boyfriend," she said as if talking to a fool.

"Huh?" He replied unintentionally. Mai had just said 'Onee-chan', maybe she was a younger twin? No, when they had spoken about siblings, he had asked Mai before and she had said that she had a younger sister she had a slightly complicated relationship with. Mai's father had divorced her mother and left them before remarrying another woman and having a daughter with her. A younger sister from another mother, they weren't twins and they shouldn't even be the same age, it was nearly impossible they would look identical.

However, then what other possibility was there? He didn't have the slightest idea.

But because of that, "Who are *you*?" was the only thing that he could ask...

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